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THE LEAP

by
Bill Hopkins



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For Violet
Encore toujours

'You Pigs! Do you want to live forever!'
Frederick the Great of Prussia,
exhorting his troops to battle.

Foreword

by

Colin Wilson

When this book first appeared in 1957, it was attacked with unprecedented ferocity. Why did it cause such violent reactions?

The answer is that it raises certain 'dangerous' moral questions in a way that had not been attempted since Max Stirner's *Ego and His Own* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.

In the first dozen pages the author actually invites us to sympathise with a hero-murderer who alienates us entirely. In that solicited act of empathy, the author crosses swords with our rejection and wills us to consider again. It turns out to be more complicated, and in many ways more frightening, than the book's most hostile critics assumed.

I have compared the novel to Stirner and Nietzsche: I might have added that it has something in common also with Albert Camus' *The Rebel*, which also led to accusations of 'fascism.' While containing perceptible affinities to all these inflammatory works, this astonishing novel remains wholly original and unobliged to anything preceding it.

But if we are to understand the historic importance of this work, rather than merely reacting to the brutality of its impact, perhaps the best approach is through its philosophical predecessors..

Stirner's *Ego and His Own* (*Der Einziger und sein Eigentum*, 1845) is basically an assertion of the importance of the individual ego in the face of all philosophies that try to make a man a mere part of something bigger - society, the State, the Church, or whatever. For Stirner, religion is a confidence trick and philanthropy is a hoax. Man is always looking round for crutches, for supports; that is why he loves being a part of a mob or a group. Anything to avoid the appalling burden of standing on his own feet and recognising his own hidden possibilities. Stirner's book was, of course, ignored, and he died a decade later, poor and forgotten.

Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* came out more than forty years after *The Ego and His Own*, in 1887, and is subtitled: 'An Attack.' It is, in some ways, Nietzsche's most terrifying book. It asks the question: what is the basis of our idea of good and evil? We must, he says, begin by questioning all moral values. Where does the idea of goodness originate? Studying its development in ancient languages, Nietzsche reached the conclusion that 'good' originally meant 'noble' and that 'evil' originally meant 'common,' 'plebian,' or 'base.'

To begin with, he says, the nobles were a priestly caste, so 'good' and 'noble' meant the same thing. Then (and here he is historically correct, as I discovered when I came to write a *Criminal History of Mankind*) soldiers and world conquerors came on the scene, and became an independent power in society. The soldier's idea of good remained an ideal of chivalry, aristocracy and nobility. This meant that the priests began to develop their own rival notion of good - involving intelligence, spirituality, self-sacrifice, and so on. All this came to a head in the religious philosophy of Judaism.

'Whatever else has been done to damage the powerful and great of this earth seems trivial compared to what the Jews have done, that priestly people who succeeded in avenging themselves on their enemies and oppressors by radically inverting all their values... This was a strategy entirely appropriate to a priestly people

whose vindictiveness had gone most deeply underground. It was the Jew who, with frightening consistency, dared to invert all the aristocratic value-equations - good, noble, powerful, beautiful, happy, favoured-by-the gods - and maintain, with the furious hatred of the underprivileged and impotent, that 'only the poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, sick and ugly, truly blessed.' And so, says Nietzsche, Man became prey to 'bad conscience,' and has built his culture on an appalling inversion of all genuine and healthy values.

Now before we take the easy way out, and denounce Nietzsche (as Bertrand Russell did) as a bad messiah, a sick antisemite, a proto-Nazi, we have to recognise that he detested antisemites as brainless idiots, and that he would probably have reacted to Hitler with the same aristocratic disdain as Oswald Spengler, who earned the Fuhrer's rage by saying that he was less of a hero (helden) than a heroic tenor (heldentenor - the tenor who sings the lead in most Wagner operas). No one who has read *Zarathustra* can reduce Nietzsche to a mad messiah. His starting point was his own profound sense of the *inadequacy* of most human beings. We may reply that this was Nietzsche's bad luck. He happened to be what modern zoologists call an 'alpha', a high dominance male, a member of a very tiny percentage of any animal group; he was also perhaps the most intelligent man of his age. So it was quite inevitable that he should feel superior to most people he met - as inevitable as that a beautiful woman knows herself to be more beautiful than most women she meets. What good could it do him to bang his head against a brick wall of zoological reality?

Nietzsche's answer to that question was that even fairly mediocre human beings could be less mediocre if they were not enslaved by stupid *values*. Let us, he said, stop glorifying these Jewish (and Christian) values, and recognise that they have been elevated by a kind of conspiracy of the mediocre and ignoble. That, at least, would be a beginning. A beginning of what? A beginning of the end of the kind of second-rateness that had come to

dominate the intellectual life of his time. His reaction to the German culture of his contemporaries was very close - in fact, identical - to that expressed by Hopkins in his previously published essay *Ways Without a Precedent**.

There can be no doubt that what Nietzsche was saying is based upon a profound and original perception. Yet it is impossible for anyone who knows anything about religious mysticism not to feel that he is only grasping a part of the truth. Goodness and decency are *not* negative virtues, nor can they be dismissed as terms of 'slave morality.' He was oversimplifying. All men are somehow dual; we contain two people. And one tends to undermine the other. Kafka once said: 'In the struggle between yourself and the world, always take the world's side' - which sounds the kind of Jewish moralism that Nietzsche detested - until we realise that by 'yourself', Kafka means that *other* self, the stupid, self-doubting alien other personality inside all of us. My *Criminal History of Mankind* is largely a study of the way that world conquerors triumph over their enemies, only to become victim at last to the self-divisive factor inside themselves.

All the same, Nietzsche, like Stirner, is raising a point that most social philosophers avoid like the plague. And Camus was one of the few writers of the 20th century who dared to explore it at length. *The Rebel* (L'Homme Revolte, 1951) is basically a study in various social thinkers who have declared, like Rousseau, that man is basically free, but everywhere in chains. All kinds of poets and philosophers have clamoured for 'freedom', insisting that it is one of man's inalienable rights, like bread or water. All have failed to recognise that profound paradox that was stated by the philosopher Fichte: 'To become free is heavenly. To be free is nothing.' In other words, we appreciate freedom only when we are not free - and for about an hour or two after we become free. What Camus wants to show, in *The Rebel*, is that all this shouting about freedom is so much waste of breath. There is something rather spoilt and immature about those who shout loudest

**In the Anthology entitled 'Declaration,' published by McGibbon & Kee, 1957, representing the views of seven or eight writers called 'The Angry Young Men.'*

about human freedom, from de Sade and Marx, down to the latest left-wing radical movement. When Camus declared: 'Lautreamont makes us understand that rebellion is adolescent'. Our most effective terrorists, whether they are armed with bombs or words, are hardly out of the pram,' his left-wing friends were outraged, and Sartre broke with him.

We can see that it is all too easy to regard Stirner, Nietzsche and Camus as 'fascists,' and refuse to consider them any further. All those honest, decent people who defend the rights of minorities and wear CND badges and take part in hunger marches are bound to react with furious contempt to thinkers who declare that leftism is based on muddled thinking, and that the road to freedom is as narrow as the eye of a needle. The fact remains that the *instinct* of Stirner and Nietzsche is right, no matter how wrong they may be on certain particulars, while the instinct of altruistic do-gooders like Bertrand Russell is somehow fundamentally wrong, being based upon a simplistic and rather silly view of reality.

The challenge is to refuse to be taken in by these impeccable and apparently self-evident moral judgments of the prophets of freedom and the Utopian society. This is not an easy thing to do. Most young people - particularly those who attend our colleges and universities - take it utterly for granted that simple 'liberal' values are the only possible values for decent people. Yet Nietzsche expressed some of the fascination of rejecting these ready-made values and trying to think problems through to their conclusion. He said that when he came to brood on these questions about good and evil, 'a great variety of answers suggested themselves. I began to distinguish among period, nations, individuals; I narrowed the problem down; the answers grew into new questions, investigations, suppositions, probabilities, until I had staked off my own domain at last, a whole hidden, growing and blooming world - secret gardens, as it were, of whose existence no one must have an inkling. How blessed are we knowers, provided we know how to keep silent long enough!'

It is this sense of delight in thinking for yourself that has drawn generation after generation to the work of Nietzsche; it is a delight that only 'Outsiders' can understand. And this, finally, explains how Plowart seems to be such an alien, unacceptable Hero. Hopkins is determined that there is going to be no misunderstanding. He will not allow the reader to decide that Plowart is, after all, a basically 'nice' individual whose heart is in the right place. The only way to make the reader aware of the problems he wants to express is to prod him into a state of protest, a sense of- 'Oh no, this is going too far!'

That explains why reviewers went to unusual lengths to make sure no one read the book. Kenneth Allsop expressed the general view in his book *The Angry Decade*, in which he seems to suggest that the book is an affront to all ideals of human decency; he feels that the central character is a detestable would-be Hitler, and that instead of getting his come-uppance at the end, Hopkins violates all the rules of fiction by making him survive triumphantly.

The truth, of course, is that Hopkins feels exactly what Nietzsche felt about the lukewarm scepticism and humanism that dominates our culture. It is an attitude that comes naturally to men of powerful character and conviction. In the 1840's, Kierkegaard, the founder of modern existentialism, wrote: 'Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is wretched, for it lacks passions. Men's thoughts are too paltry to be sinful.' And the philosopher St Martin put it even more powerfully when he wrote: 'Men have believed themselves to be obeying the dictates of humility when they have denied that the earth and all the universe contains exist only for man's account, on the ground that the admission of such an idea would be only conceit. *But they have not been afraid of the laziness and cowardice which are the inevitable results of this affected modesty.* The present day avoidance of the belief that we are the highest in the universe is the reason that we lack the courage to work in order to justify that title...'

And D.H. Lawrence, another natural 'alpha,' created a number of heroes who have much in common with Plowart.

But all that was before the coming of Hitler. With the rise of Nazism, the views of thinkers like Stirner, Nietzsche, St Martin and Lawrence began to take on altogether more sinister overtones. And it would seem that there is nothing much we can do about it. Hopkins, on the other hand, is quite determined to do something about it. He refuses to accept that anyone who raises these same basic questions about human purpose and the morality of power is bound to be tarred with the same brush as the Nazis. He insists that what he is talking about is *not* power-mania or a desire to put human beings in concentration camps, but the fundamental issue of whether man is a god or a worm. What fascinates him is a phenomenon that Shaw remarked upon in *Man and Superman*: that a coward can be made brave by putting an idea into his head. 'Men never really overcome fear until they imagine they are fighting to further a universal purpose - fighting for an idea, as they call it.'

Romain Gary makes the same point in *The Roots of Heaven*. In a German concentration camp, the prisoners are becoming demoralised - until one of their number persuades them to play an absurd game - to pretend that there is a beautiful woman in the hut. If they swear or fart, they have to bow to her and apologise. The result is astonishing, and the Germans are baffled by the rise in morale. When they find out the reason, they decide to try psychological subtlety, and tell the men they intend to place the girl under arrest, and that she is to be symbolically 'handed over' the next day. Whereupon the prisoners reply that they have no intention of handing over the girl, and the Germans realise that they have placed themselves in an absurd position...

Gary believed, like Plowart, that men possess extraordinary unknown powers, and that the root of these powers is the imagination. What worries Plowart is that there is a powerful subconscious element of non-belief, of

the 'spirit that negates,' inside him: his *negative* imagination seems to be able to undo the work of his positive imagination. This is the problem he wants Claremont to help him solve. This is why he has become co-founder of a political party. He feels that imagination is not enough; the answer has to lie in action. The saviour requires a saviour. At the end of the book, he has to learn the hardest of all lessons: that he will never solve his problem while he looks to someone else to provide him with the answer. Claremont is lying when she tells him that the rocks will move if he has enough faith; yet the rocks *do* move, and he is saved.

In the deepest sense, this final scene of the book is an affirmation of 'the absurd.' It is absurd that the morale of dispirited prisoners can be raised by an *imaginary* girl; yet it is so. It is as preposterous as the Indian rope trick, where a fakir climbs a rope which is attached to nothing. Plowart's problem is a deep-rooted assumption that the rope *must* be attached to something; the end of the book shows him his mistake. The power he seeks lies in *the mind itself*.

What, in fact, would Plowart do with his new-found insight? My own suspicion is that he would turn his back on 'the nest of politics' - for his need for political action has the same root as his need for a 'saviour.' I am by no means sure Hopkins would agree with me. But I am certain of one thing: that this book raises one of the most important issues of our time.

Author's Preface To The New Edition

The widening interest shown in this novel is somewhat surprising since it was not originally intended for a wide readership. To be candid, it was written with the idea of offering a seminal work for a few concerned people who appreciated the need to revitalise the novel, or to create a new form altogether.

Before I began writing this, it was very evident that the novel as a vehicle for ideas was progressively dying. There was not much argument about that either among the authors involved, or with the booksellers who had the sisyphian role of pushing their efforts to purchase.

The public, in short, was going to sleep, profoundly bored with repetitive fare that offered neither depth nor change.

The villains actually were and still are the publishers. Entrepreneurs mostly attracted to literature for financial returns but lacking imagination or acquaintanceship with any but the most jejeune ideas, they exhibit only an ambition to construct a mass-production belt of novels on any catch-penny theme that made money in the past. Since they are the people who essentially have the yes or no on any novel commissioned or sent in, their power to resist creative originality - especially when viewed as a senseless financial gamble - ensures the death of literature more than anything else.

With this in mind, I must admit the welfare of British publishers was not among my cares when a particularly culture-conscious left-wing property multi-millionaire who had just snapped up an ailing publishing firm made an approach and offered the chance of publishing any novel I cared to write, however different it might be.

I'm afraid the poor devil got more than he expected with this iconoclastic blare of the trumpet.

Within a month of its appearance this novel was subjected to an orchestrated barrage of abuse from every quarter imaginable. I would recommend the serious student of literature to research the near-hysteria of the attacks by a few hours study in the Newspaper Museum at Colindale, and thereafter draw his own conclusions. I was left in little doubt myself that the book had touched upon an abcess so foul with poison that whoever lanced it would surely be killed.

My left-wing publisher, I am sad to report, was generally vilified by his political Svengalis for having let such a fiend through the door. It was not long after that he was found drowned in Athens. I do not think this novel was accountable for that, but rather imagine it was his friends who indirectly did him in for quite other reasons.

But I must record that he genuinely did his best to suppress it after the horrifying dimensions of his political error were brought home to him. I would estimate something of the order of two thousand copies escaped, the rest being coldly executed. As a consequence, I probably hold the world's publishing record for going speedily 'out of print'.

The ironic effect was to make the book a bibliographical rarity, commanding quite ridiculous prices in the hands of book-dealers, but having nothing to do with the value of the book as such at all.

On the other hand, the effect of the copies that did manage to escape both the publishers and the hoarding of book-dealers has proved a continuing potency despite the passing years. A recent example of this was provided by the celebrated film producer who explained, when he

purchased the film rights, that he had been personally obsessed by the characters and ideas for the past ten years. As a strange coincidence, on the day of his arrival from America and appearance on my doorstep, a letter was delivered from a totally unknown pair of young composers in Dorchester, Dorset, requesting permission to compose a cycle of songs based on the novel's characters. The surrealist painting that composes the dustjacket of this volume was painted by the rapidly rising artist Frederick Phillips after happening on the book in his local library. It is the street in London that Plowart left behind him.

These random instances, together with many others, persuade me that I did not altogether waste my time in writing this book. The seeds sown are germinating in the intended creative places, and I find that gratifying.

I did not design this book to win easy acceptance, of course. That was the opposite direction entirely, allowing the reader to coast through the pages on what I might term a 'motor response,' with a mind largely uninvolved. Rather, I wanted a suspicious, even a hostile reader, with all the aliveness enmity means.

The central problem that concerned me was the dearth of prototypes in the way of new heroes and heroines capable of generating fresh values and visions to a spiritually directionless and dying society such as our own. To my mind, spawning such possibilities is the paramount purpose of literature, with entertaining or titillating empty-headed readers only a secondary consideration.

Although that is always a craft in itself, of course.

In retrospect, the amount of quarry-blasting involved in bringing together the various levels of this fable, together with creating the people inhabiting it, engaged my resources more than a dozen run-of-the-mill novels would have done. As it was *terra incognita*, with no parallels either in the past or in the present, the text, as a result, contains imperfections, awkwardnesses and errors which could and should be corrected.

Nevertheless I have let them stand unaltered because

that is how they were in the first edition. Also, I think it is instructive for the reader to see the occasional bone protruding through the flesh, much as the preparatory sketch often illuminates more than the completely worked-over painting.

It is just such things that inspire future writers with the correct contempt and determination to surpass their predecessors. If that is so in this case I shall be well content.

One

All the way out from England he was conscious of his loneliness. He tried to mitigate it by talking to the other passengers, but he had nothing in common with any of them. To them, the idea of anyone going to Vachau for a month was 'fantastic'.

'There's nothing there, Old Boy! Nothing whatever. I went there a couple of years ago on a day trip from Guernsey. D'you know what I found?'

Sombre and rolling, the sea was darkening to meet the night changes of the sky. 'Nothing,' Plowart said.

'That's right. Just rocks, gulls and tides. Take my word for it, Vachau is only a lump of bare rock above water. When there's a storm nobody's safe on it, as you'll discover! It's not much better on a good day, either. The sun brings out the stench of rotting seaweed and it spreads everywhere. There's no escaping it.

'The only inhabitants are six or seven dozen islanders speaking a crazy, bastard patois that nobody else of the Channel Isles understands. Believe it or not, I only saw a couple of them throughout the time I was there. Curious creatures, cloaked to the ears in filthy canvas, with a tangle of greasy hair hiding what the canvas didn't.

'The place hasn't even a decent beach!'

'That's what I hoped.' It was impossible to separate the sea and sky; they had completely married now. Averting his eyes impatiently, he met his companion's curious glance and added brusquely: 'I'm not the type for holiday resorts.'

The man had a crimson face heavily seamed with veins and above it a cluster of fine white hair which the wind seized every few minutes and whipped across his eyes. He swept it

back each time with a swift, unthinking gesture. Plowart watched with an ironic smile as it was thrown back once more. Stung by the remark and the smile, the man said: 'I confess the place depressed me unutterably. Anywhere seems preferable to that for a holiday.'

'I'm going there to recuperate.' He wondered what the fellow would have answered had he said: 'It's a place to sleep undisturbed before murder; a respite before impossible achievements; an armistice to bring my wars to their settlements.' But he would have found it incomprehensible, of course, like Vachau's crazy bastard patois.

'Oh, you've been ill, eh? You made me wonder . . .' His relief at finding an explanation was transparent and amusing.

'Not in the least.' Plowart found himself talking with animation and was surprised, as always, by what the other parts of him did. 'I've explained myself badly. I've got to get to Vachau first before I can be ill. Nobody who matters will hear about it there.'

When he had seen the man approaching along the rails with his faded blue eyes darting from one group of passengers to another, obviously searching for a receptive ear, he had dismissed him as a fool. But the need to talk persuaded him to go on.

'The illness goes back to my youth . . .'

The man shot an appraising look at him. 'But surely you're only about thirty now? A young man!'

'Ten years ago! The start of my twenties, to be exact. During that period of my life I used to go to all the rowdiest parties in London. I didn't go for enjoyment, you understand. No, to discipline myself. The outstanding trait of my personality was a strong aversion to other human beings; I saw in them all a shabby travesty of myself and of everything that constitutes human greatness.'

His companion laughed. 'Greatness being you?'

Plowart regarded him coldly. 'Since you think it funny, yes.' His voice, level but with an almost imperceptible undercurrent

of passion to it, was fluent and rapid. 'An instinct warned me to shun people before I was contaminated by their rottenness. I chose to abuse the instinct—and I'm still paying for it.'

'Rottenness?' The crimson face looked away intolerantly. 'Isn't that a strong word?'

Plowart shrugged his indifference to the potency of a particular word. 'The instinct seemed unhealthy to my young mind and I overrode it by going to parties that promised to attract the largest number of guests.'

'The parties were given and attended by the very people who most repelled me. Self-betrayers who shouted out their emotions and private lives like costermongers, revelling in the laughter they aroused against themselves. Theirs was a game of persistent self-belittlement and ultimately the disparagement of all humanity.'

'You can imagine how obscene they appeared to a young man with an instinct for solitude and greatness. I was determined society wasn't going to defeat me, though. In my defiance I out-drunk everyone around me . . .'

Taking advantage of the slight pause, the other interjected: 'You were right to fight it. The ability to laugh at oneself is the beginning of commonsense.'

'I suspected myself of being a Puritan, that was it! The bare suspicion of that made me fling aside all fastidiousness. But what I suppressed in one form appeared in another. Whatever I drank—whisky, gin or vodka—my stomach refused, and I had to throw it up. I remember talking endlessly to a parade of changing faces with a glass of some wretched mixture in one hand, an attentive smile on my lips, and the need to vomit slowly blackening the whole of my mind.'

'That urge to vomit produced a feeling of being irretrievably lost. There's nothing more horrible than that coming over one in the middle of a room full of people trading one's Christian name. I felt I belonged nowhere, either in time or space. That's how I was at those parties: a smiling young man wanting to spew and deny all association with his own species!

'The flimsiest excuse and I was off to the lavatory, throwing up the evening's hospitality with a violence that was literally soul-shaking. After it was done, I would lean against a wall, weakly wiping my mouth and feeling I had miraculously regained my purity. I can remember the misery and the joy of those occasions running side by side through my body. But even with the wonder of purity back in me, I would grimly return to the party for another bout of punishment! It took me a long time to find out that it wasn't me that was wrong, but the world . . .' His voice rose to sudden vehemence. 'So that's what I'm doing now. I'm leaving the party to spew!'

'Astonishing!' Lit down one side by the deck lights, which had just flickered on to combat the night, the crimson face nodded reminiscently. 'Our stories coincide. I could never hold my drink, either. It took me a good three years to build a strong stomach lining. Now nobody can hold me and I can drink like the Devil himself.'

Plowart said savagely: 'The Devil would be lacking all greatness if he turned to liquor. Whether you're for or against him, he is complete; allow him that at least. Complete in his evil, his sinning, and in his fulfilment. He would be incapable of carrying out his offices and practices, otherwise. Fulfilment is the only answer to existence so why should he escape from it? No, don't put yourself with the Devil any more than with God. That stomach of yours is the result of weakness, smallness and incompleteness. You stand with nobody great, neither God nor the Devil.' In the silence that succeeded this outburst, he added gloomily: 'You just join the rest of the world.'

Embarrassed by the unexpected personal turn that the conversation had taken, the man got to his feet. 'No arguments over deep waters . . . dry land's the place for those. You may be right, who knows? But I ought to get some sleep. Good-night!'

Barely bothering to glance up from his deckchair, Plowart said: 'Good-night!'

He sat alone, staring in front of him for several hours that

seemed little more than moments and when he looked around the last passenger had left the deck to retire for the night. A steward approached: 'A berth, sir?'

'I don't think so. Bring me a few blankets and I'll wrap them around to keep out the cold.' When the blankets were brought he spread them around his shoulders and over his knees. The boat was present to him only by the glimmer of a few nightlights that burned here and there from the bridge, companionways and crew quarters. Over the boat rails on either side the water pitched heavily away into the gloom. Beneath him, the churning propellers laid a path of froth across the ocean.

He felt strangely quiescent and remote, not desiring to move a hand or a muscle of the face to reveal his aliveness. After another hour had passed, the sea became rougher, sending the vessel coursing steeply up and down. This progress of suspension and descent settled his thoughts and transported him to sleep.

It was a dreadful sleep, compounded of horror and isolation. When it began his face and body convulsed in protest against the sagging confinement of the deckchair, but there was no one to wake him. The nightmare took him back to the East End of London, opening as he left the street and stepped across the threshold of his campaign office.

He was propelled steadily up the stairs to the second floor, and the same force that pushed him from behind went ahead on the landing and threw open the office door. Inside, posters with green lettering plastered every wall. Like those on the hoardings throughout the district, they pictured his deep-eyed, long face with its characteristic expression of cold determination and the mouth faintly curved with an enigmatic smile. Above each portrait was emblazoned: 'Peter Plowart.' And underneath, the words: 'Your friend. Help him defeat Landlords, Bosses and Poverty. He can—with your help!'

The words had been chosen for their simplicity and

sincerity, but they were cheap and futile now. As he crossed the room to his desk, he said softly: 'I'm only dreaming. This won't damage me however it ends.' But even as he uttered this safe conduct, he knew it was untrue and words were wasted in this situation.

His desk was in the farthest corner, close to a window looking down on a side-street. He had almost reached it when the window was pierced by a missile. It flickered and wheeled unidentifiably through the air, then landed with a tinkle of metal on the glass of his desk writing stand. He advanced and picked it up. It was a silver coin; an ordinary florin.

Thinking that it had been wrapped as a weight inside a message, and that the paper had fluttered to the ground after passing through the glass, he turned to the window. There was no sign of a message. His next thought was that such a message could be ripped free on impact with the pane, perhaps fluttering down on the window ledge outside. He started forward, but suddenly trembled and stopped, his attention caught by the hole drilled through the glass. The circumference was curling like a pair of lips quivering on a scream. In a state of stupefied terror he waited, watching the hole pursing and relaxing; then a wind started to blow. At first, the wind was only a sharp hiss of increasing pressure, but imperceptibly it changed into the thunderous shouting of a multitude of people.

Although intermingled, the voices were as separate and distinct as flying sparks whirling within a general conflagration. In each of them was the misery and bewilderment of the lost, but together they cried: 'We want Plowart! God grant Plowart!' The wind blew the words through the glass in trumpeted volleys. 'Only Plowart can end our night of pain!' And finally, in a crescendo of demand, with the words deliberate and spaced: 'We choose Plowart!'

The shouting subsided and the wind resumed, but now it played a harsh, fierce jet about the office. It wrenched one of the posters in half, sending one part flurrying across the

floor and leaving the rest on the wall with Plowart's face ripped from ear to ear. Next, the whole window began to rattle wildly until it became a high-speed blur of movement and disintegrated with a sharp explosion, sweeping down on him in a cloud of broken wood and glass.

Hands over his head, he fell beneath the debris and lay motionless on the floor, hoping the torment would end if he showed no sign of consciousness. It seemed as if this stratagem might succeed, for the wind paused and fell away and the fluttering of the posters stopped. Taking account of the strange peace that had fallen around him, he raised his face cautiously and looked around. He saw nothing new waiting to assail him, so he scrambled to his feet hurriedly. But he was still in the clutch of fear.

Immediately he had got to his feet he found himself confronted by an old man standing on the window ledge, with an imperturbable smile on his white lips and mockery in his eyes. The outstanding feature of the full, puffy face was a pair of bushy grey eyebrows that conveyed an impression of immense age and power to the whole countenance. Apart from the eyebrows and the bloodless lips, the man was as unremarkable as the clothes he wore: a grey lounge suit, a clean linen shirt and sober blue tie, and a neat pair of polished shoes with pointed toes.

As Plowart's eyes met his, he lurched at the knees in the manner of a fatigued old gentleman, placed his right hand against the side of the window aperture to support himself, and raised his other hand to his forehead in a gesture of weariness.

'There, Plowart!' he said. 'Did you hear them? Pitiful fools! But the reception you've always dreamed of, eh? Why, a king in crown and full panoply couldn't cajole a more gratifying ovation. There's many a world-shaking tyrant who never had one a fraction as loud, even at the height of his power.'

'Oh, I don't deny Napoleon's was more exhilarating after

his first exile, but that was a more elementary matter of hope, triumph, and fresh glory in prospect for a particular people. In short, a phenomenon of yesterday—for the cavalcade of conquerors has come to an end. Today, an inexplicable world makes all leadership impossible.' He stopped, peering at the silent figure from under his impossible eyebrows. 'Yes, the mammoths have lost their tusks, so flourish yours as briskly as you like, for they'll not do you a jot of good. No, there's no glory to be won today. At best, the saviours within your own life-span can only reduce universal misery. Not stop it, you understand, but merely confine it a trifle. Triumphs of violence are out of the question! The *Zeitgeist* has changed, and make no mistake about it. If you brood on Charlemagne, Bonaparte or any other titan of the times gone past, you're wasting your life!' He chuckled. 'But you're wasting it whatever you do . . .'

Conversation simply was not possible with this apparition. He intercepted Plowart's thought between his mind and his lips, replying before it even found utterance. 'Why concern yourself? You're just as inadequate as the rest of the species . . . insufficient, irresolute, incapable, impotent . . . merely a delicate wire arrangement of weaknesses, threaded through a spindle of illusory strength. There! A definition of Man for you. An act of faith makes the spindle, but the years that jerk the wires ultimately pull the lot down. Too small even for tragedy . . . too small for anything but suffering and pity!

'Watch any fine face warp through the years, whether with success or failure; it buckles so comically! Pah! Cowardice, futility, compromise and inadequacy, that's the dictionary of existence, you'll find. Why oppose it?'

As he talked, in the maniacal disjointed manner of dreams, with marked imprecisions between thoughts, he struck a succession of different attitudes and expressions to complement his words. Each essay was so ingenious that it was almost a transformation of his personality, and only the fluidity with which each was adopted and abandoned gave unity to the next.

It was the casual virtuosity of a quick-change artiste availing himself of the stupendous wardrobe of human variations. The droop of the mouth, the lift of the eyebrow always springing the effect, the sudden inheritance of a new role. But the pantomime was limited to attitudes at the extremes of despair . . . suffering the desolations of that ill-lit landscape behind the imagination at its most tilted. Each time the mime succeeded through caricature rather than honest portrayal, for these interpretations were essentially what might be expected of an intelligent man without an iota of vision, and their cruelty lay in the fundamental concept of humanity as a mathematical equation that totalled up, not unsurprisingly, to folly. Plowart was not so crippled by his circumstances that he did not understand what the other was up to. Of course, Man was ridiculous in the sphere of concepts; in this sense he was undeniably an anomaly. But he had to be taken as an object of compassion, beyond all reason—that or nothing! His rage at the old man's tactics and twisted reasoning had only the effect of locking his mouth and protracting his silence.

Watching the old man perform, he reflected that this was the stupidity of all cultured minds. Remove the passions, and human beings truly are futile, impotent and inadequate . . . He watched the face of a mother seeing her baby crushed to death, and the negligent flip of the hand that said in postscript: what did it matter, it would have died in some other way just as wasteful . . . A soldier bayoneted through the belly with his hope of immortality streaming like tears from his eyes. (If he'd cried that hope away sooner, he'd have kept out of uniform, the silly fellow!)

As disconcertingly as he had begun, the old man tired of his theatricalities and dropped the mask of idiocy he had assumed at the death of his last part. He said: 'When you separate the faces of a crowd, the truth is that any reception palls. I spared you that by allowing you only to hear them as—what's the term?—Yes, "Voices off!" If you had any experience in the matter you'd thank me for it. But as you haven't, accept

my word that your hallucination of Man's greatness collapses in the face of it.

'Your youth, and the power you seek leads only to quantity. It's a mistake; but less of a mistake than looking for quality, because that vanished a long time ago. But you'll go from the lesser mistake to the larger if you insist on separating and valuing one against another. Poor Plowart will find himself in the kingdom of nothing, where everything is worthless. It's quite absurd to any man of logic, you must agree!'

He jumped down into the room as he finished speaking, turning a little to avoid Plowart and landing lightly on the balls of his feet. He looked about him with a crooked smile. 'So this is where your empire begins? Have you given your constituents any idea of the man they'll vote for?' In front of the ripped poster he stopped, broke into laughter, and turned to study Plowart. 'That's right; quite right! From ear to ear, then!'

With defeat already in his mind and knowing this dream was not to be won, Plowart exclaimed angrily: 'Laugh as much as you want!'

The figure walked to the far end of the office, hunching his shoulders as he walked and putting his hands to his forehead as if grappling with some profundity. Reaching the furthest wall, he turned and shouted violently: 'Can't you forget power! Even I have none!'

The words precipitated a violent seizure, plunging him into physical spasms, almost epileptic, that seemed to lift him up and hurl him bodily through the window. On all the walls the letters of the posters began to writhe and topple like molten green candles, and the replicas of Plowart slumped and wriggled in such a gallery of appalling monstrosities that the very revulsion of them catapulted him back to reality.

He opened his eyes and in front of him he saw the moon high and clean in the night. The thumping turns of the boat's engines matched his heart beats as he concentrated his gaze

upon the sky and tried to subdue the fear that still pervaded him. Under his clothes he felt the perspiration streaming down his belly to his loins, and the hair clung damply to his scalp. But his throat and mouth were as dry as dead flesh. He moved his tongue, manufacturing spittle and trying not to swallow any until he had enough. As he did this, he leaned his face against the wooden frame of the deckchair, taking pleasure from its hardness as he looked at the moon. For some fifteen minutes Plowart rested before he felt strong enough to recall the nightmare. Its horror rested on his inadequacy to deal with a world fallen apart that had accepted him as its leader. He shuddered, remembering the plight of the people who had called to him from Whitechapel. They had nominated the one person to lead them who stood alone in understanding the true impossibility of leadership. Here it was again! He wrenched himself free from the insidious influence of the nightmare with a sense of despair. At the back of his mind the same words were repeated over and over with hypnotic regularity: 'An inexplicable world makes leadership impossible.' He recognised it as another tentacle of the nightmare and seized it. 'Damned surface logic!' he muttered angrily. 'Life is inexplicable because it's uncontrolled. Control it, and there's nothing that can't be explained. The fight is for control!'

With his eyes open, he thought of the procession of nightmares that had tormented him from earliest adolescence. 'Apocalyptic dreams and no-trespassing slogans!' Each had sapped him of resolution and his triumphs had been confined to proving each one wrong. This was like all the others. It had made its charge and gone. What was its charge? Not an actual inadequacy within him; that was too easy to refute. No, wider and more destructive, it had hit at the vast human ineffectuality of which he was part. This was what had made his election posters futile, his words' waxen and his photographs monstrous. If these were the instruments to win him a seat in Parliament he had forfeited his deposit already!

He half-rose, suddenly filled with fear that his departure

from London before the balloting had been a mistake. Then he sat down again, groaning and enraged by this self-division. It revealed the extent of the undermining power of these nightmares, even in issues where he was fully confident. 'I'm damned if I shall go back! The seat's already mine, and the whole thing was nothing but a caricature!'

Despite this, he fell to brooding over the various incidents and symbols of the visitation in an attempt to correlate them to reality. He was asleep before he realised he was tired, so the nightmare remained undeciphered, as enigmatic as a signal received from another world.

He was awakened when the boat cut its sharp curve into St. Peter Port harbour. It was six-thirty by his watch, and when he looked around, the dawn light hurt his eyes. He stood up and neatly folded the blankets on the deckchair before crossing to the side. Passengers were already lounging about the deck, chatting together or standing alone like himself, smoking and silent. His legs felt strange and awkward when he put his weight on them, and he noticed this particularly when he walked over to the rails. He leaned over and transferred most of his weight on to his elbows, affording himself some relief. The face of the water made him feel rumpled and untidy after his uncomfortable night on the deckchair, and the stubble on his chin against the back of his hand reminded him he would have to find somewhere to shave.

His eyes were caught by a long mound of rock about ten miles away that soared from the water to a towering height. Around it, small crags and islands showed above the sea a sprawling archipelago that wrenched the water into twisting strands. The main mass had a desolate magnificence that almost precluded the idea of human habitation. It looked a place only for migratory birds, strange fish and everlasting silences. The sheerness and gauntness communicated an impression of something that had been violently driven up from the bed of the ocean overnight, rather than an island

that had risen slowly over aeons of time. Close to its crest, clouds were hanging motionless with their edges lanterning the first gold of the sun. Beneath the sun the rock itself was as black and still as a shadow, its contours drawn by the faint whiteness around its base where the water was being flung back as ruthlessly as it advanced.

Plowart knew, without needing to be told, that this fortress of shroud and surf was Vachau. Further over to the east were other large masses, Sark, Alderney and Herm, but they were all lower upon the water and less stark. They had become reconciled to their environment, but the divorce between Vachau and the element that swirled about its base and poured down on its head on rainy days was a rift that appeared eternal to Plowart, watching it with a narrowed unblinking gaze.

He was still watching when the island was only a distant blur and the deck quivered under him as the ship jarred against the landing pier, went off a few feet, then slowly came to rest. At this point he turned away and unhurriedly collected his luggage from beside the deckchair. There was nothing superfluous, apart perhaps from a portable radio, its compact black case still shiny and new. For the rest, he had brought one suitcase, a canvas hold-all, a briefcase and finally a bundle of magazines with an elastic band about them. The magazines he slipped into the capacious pocket of his tweed overcoat and, weighed down with the rest of the luggage, he joined the throng of passengers waiting to land.

In the general surge forward when the gangway went down, he was hustled unceremoniously along with the rest, an indistinguishable face among all the others. Going down the gangway, he slipped on one of the worn rungs and had to drop the suitcase to save himself from falling. An official caught at his elbow and handed the suitcase back to him.

'Careful! Don't want to come a cropper before you've started your holiday!'

'Thanks. Where do I get the boat for Vachau?'

'Further down the pier. Goes at two o'clock. You've plenty of time.'

Parting with his ticket, Plowart nodded to the cluster of buildings at the other side of the harbour. 'Can I get breakfast over there?'

'Keep walking and on past the clocktower, sir.'

He walked for a hundred yards and found the cafés, hotels and restaurants densely lined along an esplanade that curved down the shoreline. It was so early St. Peter Port was still sleeping, apart from a few fishermen taking their small craft out to sea, and the first market-garden truckers and loaders bringing crates of tomatoes to the boat that he was leaving behind.

Plowart passed five cafés before he came to one that was open. It was badly painted and its glass front was unpolished, but seeing lights and a figure busy behind a counter he pushed the door and went in.

It was a long, unhygienic place. Three low-wattage bulbs burning at the far end illuminated only a serving hatch, a few tables directly beneath them, and part of the counter. The walls were painted a depressing brown from floor to ceiling. A middle-aged man with heavy, muscular shoulders and thick, dishevelled hair was tinkering with a large urn next to the cash till.

When the door opened, he looked up briefly without change of expression and continued to adjust the gas pressure beneath the urn. With the door closed on the seafront, the café could have been situated in London or Berlin or Paris, for its furnishings, decorations and lighting belonged to the poor quarter of any capital.

He took the table closest to the windows, setting his radio on the table and piling the rest of his luggage against the wall. While he waited to be served he tuned in to London. As usual at this time in the early morning they were playing excerpts from musical comedies and he sat back and listened aimlessly. The table rocked slightly when he lifted one elbow to light a cigarette, and he protectively rested his hand on the radio

until the table had steadied. Although the music was still playing, it had lost his attention; his eyes were on the clouds showing above the yellowing lace across the windows. They had a curiously emptying effect on him and gradually he became just a watcher with his eyes on the sky and animation only in the hand that held the cigarette. On the perimeter of his consciousness he recorded two loud pops of exploding gas from the direction of the urn, but he was unaware of the man's approach until he spoke.

'What can I do for you?' His pale green eyes, still half-closed from sleep, looked first at Plowart, then at the radio and the luggage with an insolent curiosity.

'Eggs, liver and tomatoes,' Plowart said briefly. 'And a pot of strong tea.'

The man grinned at the radio. 'Music anywhere, eh?' He hummed a bar or two of the *Quaker Girl*.

Plowart switched off the radio impatiently, leaving the man humming alone. 'I want a room until two this afternoon. Have you got one?'

The man looked at him aggrievedly: 'No need to switch off,' he said. 'You act as if you don't like music.'

'I don't,' Plowart retorted. 'What about that room?'

'There's a small one going on the first floor, second door on the left off the landing.' He indicated a flight of stairs beside the counter with a sharp nod.

'Good. I'll shave while you're getting the breakfast.'

Plowart took his canvas hold-all and found the room without difficulty. It was a small, shadowed box of a place, as dingy as the downstairs dining-room, but with a good mirror above the sink lit by its own light. He ran the hot water tap with his fingers under it to test its warmth, watching his reflection slowly obscured by steam. When the sink was half full he turned off the tap and unfastened his watch. Around his wrist the strap had left a band of bruised, angry redness that divided the flesh like a whip-lash. He lathered his chin and jowls, rubbing the mist off the glass with the other hand.

His face was leaden-complexioned and too thin. It was not the face of a self-indulgent man, but neither was it a healthy face enjoying the passage of years. As he shaved, he tried to define it. The best description he found was too general to be good. A face produced by friction; every curve and line predictable by the quantity and acuteness of experience suffered. The distance and speed of a falling body . . . It was the principle of meteorites, starting large in their hurtling descent and finishing the size of a pea. Yes, a man's suffering eventually becomes a physical reduction.

Shaving under his jaw, with his face tilted and his eyes slitted like an animal, he made it a clean mathematical equation; power plus velocity equals diminution. By the time he had re-knotted his tie he had carried it to the *reductio ad absurdum*: supreme power equals absolute dissolution. Nothing rewarded by everything!

He replaced his shaving kit and accessories in the hold-all and, as he drew the zip across the canvas, the old man knocked at the door. He called out: 'All right, I've just finished. Serve it; I'll be down immediately.'

The plug came free with a jerk, and the water flowed out of the sink leaving a line of scum along the sides of the basin. Plowart rubbed it off with his fingers, moistening them under fresh water. The scum was the dirt gathered since he had washed aboard the boat at ten o'clock the previous night. He watched the last of it go down with the water, then snapped off the light and went downstairs, thinking about the dirt and deterioration of nine hours.

The man was just setting out his food as he crossed to the table. The wash and shave had done him good; already his mind was clear and alert. The tomatoes had a fresh scarlet radiance that seemed painted beside the dullness of the liver and eggs. He tasted them with suspicion, but they were juicy and obviously fresh from the plant. By the time the tea arrived he had finished eating. His rate of consumption had been so rapid the man was astonished, and picked up the plate

disbelievingly. 'For God's sake!' he exclaimed, 'When did you eat last?'

'Last night,' Plowart said. 'I always eat quickly. Food bores me.'

The man looked at him consideringly, then put the plate down and walked back to the counter without a word. Plowart watched his retreating back with grim amusement. It was always the same with these elementary fools; all conversation withered as soon as it ventured near originality.

The thick earthenware teapot was so heavy he felt his wrist strain immediately he lifted it and directed the jet of liquid into the cup. The weight made his hand wobble and some of the tea splashed into the saucer. It was so quiet he could hear the sugar strike through the surface of the tea with a faint hiss before curving to the bottom of the cup. When he added milk and stirred it, the sound of the spoon against china was distinct but forlorn. Plowart drank in hasty gulps until the cup was empty, then refilled it. The tea was sharp and sweet, as vivid to his tongue as its weight and sounds had been to wrist and ears. Odd! Everything that was normally unnoticeable had suddenly become magnified.

At this point the unusually fiery hue of the tomatoes assumed a sudden new significance. Had they really been so red or had he created the degree of redness within his own mind? Would it seem altogether normal if he called for a few more? And should he do so, what guarantee was there that the new tomatoes would be from the same plant, or even that they would be as fresh? Obviously, one couldn't inquire into these fine details when ordering a second lot.

This was the *impasse*, then; he certainly was not going to make himself ridiculous over such a small matter. Under the pretext of twisting to extract his cigarette case from an inside pocket, he glanced covertly at the counter. The man had gone back to tinkering with the urn. His head was just below the level of the counter. Assured he was not being watched, he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The smoke sprang from the

tobacco and swooped down his throat, as tangible as a living shape passing through his mouth, down his throat and into his lungs. It crouched there, a menacing thing with billowing outlines, until he released it with a startled exhalation, feeling it pour over his lips in a wild escape. He stubbed out the cigarette with such force the paper split and the tobacco flaked in the ashtray. The last thread of smoke tapered lower and trailed into invisibility over the edge of the table as he stared at it.

It was quite incontrovertible. First it had been the tomatoes, and he had simply been surprised by their colour. But the extraordinary weight of the teapot, the sound of dissolving sugar, the bouquet of the tea and now the frightening experience of a perfectly ordinary cigarette were transformed into the premisses of a united argument. He laid his hand upon the table and under his fingers the delicate patina of the table swirled like the lines of a sea chart. Two days ago the same fingers had told him nothing, and now they were magnifying minutiae to an importance that was inexplicable. And so were all his other senses. Each had become a seismograph . . . No!—that was irrelevant.

The door opened beside him and three swarthy men in fishermen's clothing and heavy rubber boots clumped in from the morning light. As they passed on their way to the counter, each scanned him briefly, and in their faces he saw the same peculiarly opaque expression that resisted analysis. Over his shoulder he heard them order toast and beef dripping with mugs of tea, then they took the table next to his, pulling out the chairs and sitting heavily. They had given their orders in English but they lapsed into curt toneless remarks in another tongue that was neither French nor the patois of the Channel Isles. It was beyond his understanding and extremely unpleasant, because all were afflicted with the same hoarseness that flattened out every word they spoke. He tried to resume his train of thought but the conversation disrupted every attempt. Irritably, without caring what impression his action

would produce, he got up and took the chair furthest from the men, his back firmly turned on them. A lull in the conversation showed this did not go unnoticed, but after a while the words flowed again with greater volume.

He shook his head and with an effort of will turned his attention back to himself. Why had he used the word seismograph if it was irrelevant? Were his senses telling him that an eruption was occurring below his mind and beyond investigation? Well, all things changed. The only question worth asking was whether change strengthened or weakened. If the result was merely an abnormal sensitivity it was plainly bad. All his greatest achievements, the tasks supremely completed, owed their success to the fact that he was oblivious to the world outside his own. He functioned efficiently only when his will-power focused on a single goal and all the everyday parts of existence had been blotted out. Greater achievements could only be attained by cultivating this blindness—indeed the more violently the mundane was abolished the more was won from life. The stalking lion cannot stop to admire the beauty of the terrain, nor could he. This change, if it was one, was certainly not for the good; no, the explanation was that he had concentrated all his will-power for too long in Whitechapel. Now his mind and will had slackened, creating a vacuum for anything to intrude and claim a false priority.

The realisation satisfied him and he took another gulp of tea, feeling his mind accelerate after taking a difficult gradient.

The fishermen stood up, scraping their chairs noisily. Squeezing between the narrow aisle separating the two tables on his way past, one of them knocked against one corner of the radio that Plowart had inadvertently left protruding over the table edge. The radio fell to the floor with a jarring crash. Plowart caught sight of the set falling out of the corner of his eye and whirled to grab it, but he was just too late. When the radio hit the concrete floor he whitened with rage and started to tremble slightly. 'Pick it up, you swine!' he said. His voice was dangerously low and taut.

The man looked at him angrily. 'I'm no swine!' he retorted. 'Pick it up yourself!' He had actually been on the point of offering an apology, but Plowart's words killed it. One of his companions was about to stoop and pick up the damaged set but Plowart gestured him back. 'No, leave it alone! I'm telling your friend to do it!'

The man concerned was a brawny specimen standing close to six foot high, and with the well-developed chest and shoulders of his occupation. He watched Plowart's face, biting his under-lip with annoyance at the way attention had been drawn to himself by this stranger. Despite the implacability of Plowart's white face he shook his head obstinately. 'Do it yourself, I say.'

Plowart said: 'I'm telling you for the last time . . . Now—pick it up!' He pronounced each word of this command coldly and distinctly, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on the other, who only responded by shaking his head vigorously and saying: 'Go to the devil!'

It happened so quickly he did not have time even to draw back or protect himself in any way. Plowart's right arm raised and slapped him across both cheeks in one swift forward and backward movement. The noise of flesh meeting flesh rang out crisp and loud, making the blows appear harder than they actually were. The struck man stared in amazement with both sides of his face crimsoning, unable for a moment to comprehend the what and how of the matter. Once over the surprise, however, his fury at being humiliated before his companions was savage. He sprang forward with both fists bunched and his face contorted, but suddenly he stopped dead with his fist raised to strike.

At first it was not clear to his friends why he lowered his fist and took an involuntary step back. But that backward step explained the reason by disclosing Plowart holding the knife he had seized from his plate. He had lowered himself into a crouch as a preliminary to taking the weight of the other on one shoulder and at the same time plunging the knife into an

exposed belly from the other side. Seeing his adversary retreat, he straightened slowly. 'That's a pity,' he said smiling. 'You should have kept coming.'

From the way he had grasped the knife all three fishermen could tell he was used to handling such weapons. He held it with the blade uppermost and his fingers curled down the back to drive the thrust and carry it through the disembowelling, as fishermen do from Mevagissey to Marseilles when opening fish.

The man shook his head, more in astonishment than fear. 'Over a wireless!' he said in a stifled voice, looking from one side to the other in a call for witnesses. 'He's mad!'

Plowart said: 'I told you to pick it up!' The intensity of his voice and the tightening of his fingers was enough. With a sudden angry surrender the man bent down and picked up the radio. For a moment he paused, considering whether to fling it in his tormentor's face, but he slowly lowered the leather case on to the table.

'It was an accident,' he said. As he spoke he stepped back between the others, running his fingers through his rumpled hair.

The café owner had come running over from the counter immediately Plowart hit the man, but had drawn back at the sight of the knife, as agitated as if it were he who was threatened. Now the radio was back on the table, he came forward exclaiming: 'That's right. No need to get upset, sir. Let him alone, now.'

Plowart turned the dial of the set, keeping the knife clenched in the other hand. No noise emerged, however.

One of the fishermen who had kept in the background cleared his throat loudly and said: 'We'll pay fur it. just an accident.'

'Keep your damned pence!' He brooded over the broken radio, experimenting with the useless dials. Finally he turned to the café proprietor and said abruptly: 'I'm off to Vachau this afternoon. Can they fix it there?'

The man nodded eagerly, glad to have the opportunity of

reducing the tension. 'No trouble about that, sir. An hour's work, I'd say.'

Immersed in his examination of the radio Plowart was unconscious of the glances exchanged between the three men when he mentioned his destination. His anger had gone as suddenly as it had come, and he felt sick of the whole business. He looked up and, seeing the fishermen fidgeting uncomfortably, he said curtly: 'All right. No use hanging about.'

They settled their payment at the counter in a subdued murmur, shooting occasional glances across the café, but he had sat down again and was looking through the window at the sky. They went out together, letting the door slam behind them. He raised the corner of the lace curtain and watched them cross the esplanade, their heads jerking in heated dispute. The café proprietor came up from behind, wiping his hands on a dishcloth.

'Want a piece of advice, sir?'

'No,' Plowart said. The men clambered over the parapet where the tips of masts showed in a cluster, and passed out of sight. He dropped the curtain and leaned back in his chair.

'Take a warning. Don't go to Vachau!' His furtive air and lowered voice insinuated they were two of the same kind.

'Why?'

'Those three are from Vachau. They'll be waiting for you over there.'

'I can take care of myself, thanks.'

Despite the fawning attitude Plowart recognised that in this instance the man was sincere, and as near altruistic as he could be. At Plowart's casual dismissal of his warning, he said: 'They'll not forget you, sir!'

'I like being remembered.' He thought for a moment, then smiled. 'But now I've made it difficult to find a room there, I don't doubt. Any hotels?'

'At Vachau?' The impossibility of such an idea was apparent in his scorn. 'You'll find nothing like that. There's just one tavern, the Siren. The landlord won't put up anyone

who's unpopular with the islanders, you can take it from me.'

'I see.' He deliberated, then seeing the man was expectantly suppressing a detail, he produced his wallet. 'Perhaps you know of somewhere? Someone who might prove willing?'

With his eyes eagerly on the wallet, the other nodded. 'A chap named Christopher Lumas might help. Used to come and eat here when he was first courting from Vachau just after the war. He hasn't been over since his accident, but he's a Londoner so he'll help another foreigner just for the company.'

'What happened to him?'

The man chuckled. 'Got his legs smashed up. They say he went drunk on the cliffs and took a bad fall. I'd say it was because he woke up one morning and found himself with the ugliest woman ever bred on Guernsey. Nobody wanted her until he came along and bought a home on Vachau and wanted a wife to go in it. He was no gift himself, though. He was gone forty when he came courting and only his money and house got her. Inside two years he was a cripple, so they both got bad bargains!'

'It's a hard world,' Plowart said. He pulled four pounds from his wallet and passed them over, then stood up and stretched. 'I think I'll use that bed. Call me at one o'clock, will you?'

Cheered by more money than he had hoped for, the man promised he would call his guest, and helped carry the luggage up the stairs.

Plowart did not bother to undress; he simply pulled off his shoes and lay on the bed. It was cold in the room and he rolled the top blanket around himself to stop the fit of shivering that came on him. The blanket helped a little, and he lay with his eyes on the ceiling, watching the light beginning to brighten around the windows and finally fill the whole chamber. Down the esplanade the first heavy trucks were starting to roll, and he heard them changing gear as they swept off the road and on to the quay. He moved over to reach his cigarettes and lit one, blowing out the smoke in a thin stream.

Two

Plowart had already washed when the proprietor called him, for he had not slept at all. He stayed only to drink a pot of warm tea to take the chill off the journey, then set off.

At the clock tower he saw there were only three minutes to go before the boat to Vachau put out, and he lengthened his stride. Half-way down the quay he came to a wooden kiosk with the inscription '*Day Trips to Lovely Vachau*' painted in white along its planking. A line of coloured regatta penants was strung above its roof but without a wind the penants were only limp rags. The man behind the ticket window said: 'Last aboard, eh? Well, someone has to be, of course. It's unarguable, eh?'

'A single,' Plowart said.

'If you go, you've got to come back,' the ticket-seller observed with an air of unassailable logic. With a burst of laughter, he added: 'Unarguably!'

'Not for a month.'

The man put back the ticket he had punched, a yellow return, and pushed across a green single. When he gave Plowart his change, he said smilingly: 'Do you know the place?'

'No.'

'Then buy a return! You won't like it.' He pretended to be conspiratorial, whispering his words out of the corner of his mouth.

'Your advertisement reassures me.' Looking at him through the glass, he observed the man was handsome. He had a debonair yachting cap set at an obviously calculated angle across his high forehead. The nautical note was repeated in

his crisp blue jacket with an anchor-and-chain badge in silver thread on the breast pocket. The hair escaping from the sides of the cap was a clean silver against a high-cheeked face. The skin was a gypsy olive from the long summer, and a pair of brown eyes that slanted when he smiled were a *matinée* idol's.

In the face of Plowart's examination he said: 'The tragedy is that few really lovely things last a month.' He kept his smile steadily positioned because, like his eyes, this was stock-in-trade, too. 'Yes, everything dies too quickly. The greater the wonder, the quicker the end. Count them off for yourself . . . flowers, butterflies, rainbows, perfumes, kisses . . .' Seeing there was something unsympathetic about his passenger's stare, he stopped tentatively but the speech was too truncated, so he added: 'Don't you agree?'

He was certainly a charmer. It was easy to imagine him passing whole evenings away with this kind of conversational rubbish. He was probably famous from one end of Guernsey to the other as a Lothario with an unrivalled kill of empty-headed women visitors. Watching the smile, Plowart said: 'I know what it's like. On stormy days nobody is safe from getting blown into the Channel. On good days there's the stench of rotting seaweed. It never was lovely and it never will be. Where do I find your boat?'

The smile, far from disappearing, grew wider and more charming. 'I'll lock up here and take you down to it.'

'I'll find my own way, thanks.'

'Oh, no trouble! I captain the damned thing.' He clapped a padlock on the door and, taking the heavier part of Plowart's load, led the way from the kiosk. They crossed the quay in silence and, as they walked, a low breeze started, flattening the trousers against their legs. Down the far side of the quay a flight of steps took them to a landing where a small motor cruiser was moored. It had a long deck with slatted weather-beaten benches running around the rails. There were only three other passengers for the trip, two old women, lethargically hunched up in long black scarves around their shoulders and

heads, and a man of about the same vintage with a soiled cloth cap dragged low over his head with the brim covering his eyes like a visor. A clay pipe jammed in his compressed, toothless mouth was stained yellow with nicotine. None of the three showed any interest in the arrival of the latecomers or the least impatience to be off.

A seaman jerked the gangplank aboard as soon as their feet touched the deck, and a second seaman shoved the cruiser's bow clear with a long pole. Almost instantaneously the engine fired into action, driving the cruiser out across the harbour in a burst of speed. All this happened with such rapidity that Plowart's companion had no time to take any part in the operation. The inference that he was superfluous to the running of the boat could not have been made plainer: That this impression had been created deliberately was demonstrated by the covert grins of the crew, going about their duties. The grins did not go unnoticed, and the captain left Plowart, after a moment's angry distress, to take the wheel from a deputy, brusquely ordering him out of the cabin. Plowart watched his twitching face, pretending to be occupied with the steering while really torturing himself with how to redeem his pride. He was too uncertain both of himself and his command, and any measures he took against his crew would reflect the same uncertainty and ineffectuality. He was only sure of himself as a charmer, and that business stopped on shore. It was a predicament Plowart had seen many men suffer, and he turned away and studied the water.

Vachau was about ten miles from Guernsey and the trip should have been a short one, but his estimate had not allowed for the countless twists and turns the cruiser made to avoid submerged rocks, adding considerably to the journey and reducing the speed. Over the side he saw the peaks of some of the rocks rising to just under the surface, curving like the spines of enormous fish.

Twenty minutes after leaving St. Peter Port a sharp torrent of rain pierced everyone to the skin and turned the sea into a

myriad of spouts. The rain travelled with the cruiser all the way to the island.

Vachau had seemed impregnable in the first dawn light, but a tiny harbour resolved itself behind a concrete breakwater arm when the cruiser drew under its cliffs. Approaching it, the engine was silenced and the cruiser softly slid the last yards into the quiet water beyond. As men in black oilskins on the pier caught the mooring ropes and secured them, hundreds of gulls launched themselves from the ledges of the overhanging cliffs and planed over the deck in clouds, screeching. Their cries reverberated and splintered against the high pinnacles of the rocks and crashed in trembling discords along the water. The rain stopped as the gangplank went down and the passengers and crew came ashore.

Plowart stood on the wet stones beside the boat for a while, looking about him and wiping the rain from his face with a handkerchief. The pier led straight to a narrow road that skirted the base of the nearest cliff and disappeared. The road provided the only visible way on to the island itself. He pocketed the handkerchief and set off towards it, the suitcase bumping against his thigh with every other step.

Just around the shoulder of the cliff, and concealed until he had actually rounded the bend, he found a crowd of islanders loitering on either side of the road, garbed in oilskins and hats that made them as shapeless and dishevelled as a collection of rainsodden scarecrows. He gave them only a cursory glance as he passed, but after taking a few steps he heard the men break into guffaws and whispers behind him. He turned slowly and regarded the hostile faces watching him, and among them he recognised those of the three men who had broken his radio on Guernsey. His face hardened, but he turned without a word and continued on his way.

Before he had gone very far he heard quick footsteps hurrying to overtake him, but he did not look round until his pursuer drew up level with him, breathing heavily from his exertions. 'What do you want?' Plowart asked.

'Porter yur bags, Sur?'

A sideways glance revealed a pasty, vacuous face and a shambling figure belted and buttoned in a preposterously small raincoat that ended above flannelled knees and barely-covered the elbows. It was a schoolboy's garment strained almost to bursting point across the chest of its present owner and its smallness magnified the clumsy length of the arms and legs making them nothing less than grotesque. Despite his bulk, the vacant good humour on the fellow's face made it clear that he, at least, was no part of the hostile reception committee behind them.

'I can carry my own bags, thanks.'

'You've a hard, steep hill with a mile of climbing to the top, Sur,' the man said persuasively. 'Very hard going with cases, Sur.'

'Then I shan't argue! Take hold of them.' He passed the luggage over with relief. He hated carrying weights and was always glad to see the end of such occasions. It was the feeling of imprisonment that went with the business, a kind of Sisyphean plight that accomplished nothing in the long run.

Before they had gone much further than the beginning of the hill, the porter began to puff and snort. Plowart observed this performance from the corner of his eye while ominously ignoring it to all appearances. After a few more yards the road became steeper. The porter stopped to wipe his forehead and palms free of sweat with an expensive yellow silk handkerchief that had probably belonged to some unfortunate he had portered in the past. He drew out the respite as long as he could, then stuffed away his handkerchief with an air of resignation and said: 'Where for, Sur?'

Plowart surveyed him with deliberation. 'Why?' he asked with interest. From all his puffing and blowing it was plain that the fellow was a malingerer who, having exhausted one bag of tricks, was now seeking the excuse of conversation to delay advancing up the hill.

'If we don't know where we're going, it seems to me we won't get there, Sur.'

'That's my business. I hired you to carry my gear to the top of this hill. Shall we go on?'

The man looked at him fixedly, but without another word picked up his load and began to walk again. The road spiralling above them was pitted and overgrown on both sides by tall flowers and clumps of vegetation. It was impossible to see to its end because high greenery interposed every twenty yards or so, limiting the vision to the stretch directly ahead. The air was salty and heavy, smelling of the sea and an indolent timelessness. Plowart breathed deeply and with satisfaction as he walked.

After a while the gradient became so steep that even Plowart found the going difficult, unhandicapped as he was. His assistant found it unendurable and demonstrated the fact by setting down his load at the side of the road and suddenly sprawling out full-length on a grass patch. Seeing his employer's irritation as he walked back, he called: 'No use yur shouting, Sur. Everybody rests here. I'll go on in five minutes.'

Suppressing the urge to heave the man back to his feet, Plowart said unexpectedly: 'Very well. Five minutes!'

He lit a cigarette, thinking of the role physical burdens played in killing the average man's energy and initiative. The weight itself probably constituted only a fraction of the damage, and the rest was added by the imagination, he thought.

With a gesture of impatience he threw away his cigarette and it fell in the grass close to the porter's body. Where it had fallen a feather of smoke leaned above the blades of grass. Watching it morosely, he realised again that all human effort was undeveloped and undisciplined; that the battle for human progress and growth depended as much upon the training of the body as of the mind. The sight of his porter's happy supineness aroused Plowart to a sudden rage, although the five minutes concession had not yet expired. He barked: 'Come along, get up! If you must rest, do it at the top—not the bottom!'

The man struggled to his feet reluctantly. 'It's not right!'

he complained. 'The only one offering yur help—that's me! They said yur was a killer that ought to be kept off Vachau. If anyone helped you he'd be flayed, they said. But I risked it. I risk their fists and yur knife in me gizzard for a few shillings then get cursed into the bargain. Just not worth it.'

Without listening to anything further, Plowart said musingly: 'A killer? Is that how they describe me?'

Buffonet said shortly: 'Yur earned it!' After they had walked a few more yards, he said abruptly: 'And I'll tell yur something else. There's no need to hurry me along, either. Everybody's been warned here against taking yur in. The doors are barred everywhere; bolted as fast as if it was the devil himself.'

Plowart laughed. 'Well, perhaps it is.' This remark evidently delighted him for he repeated it, adding: 'A devil to one brand of thinking, anyhow.' He considered his companion, walking heavily with his shoulders hunched and his eyes averted. 'What's your name?' he asked suddenly.

'Buffonet.' The porter gave it after a hesitation and a suspicious look, as if this stranger from the outside world was too foreign to be trusted with even bare facts. If the account that Ben Quiller and the others had given of their encounter with him was true, he was vicious enough to commit daylight murder. But Buffonet did not mean to provoke him on any account. All he wanted was a few shillings, that was all. And from the profits a little drink at the Siren.

'You're a brave man, Buffonet. You've been told I'm a killer but you offer me your services. Although your friends have threatened you, you do as you want. Well, you've less to fear from me than from your own kind. There aren't many like you left and, for my part, I'd multiply, not reduce them.' This testimonial, coming from such an unexpected quarter, took Buffonet by surprise. He glanced up quickly, to catch some mockery in the speaker's face, but seeing the words were intended seriously, he looked down again, muttering: 'I've got no kind. If I had, I shouldn't be carrying yur bags.'

‘What do you mean?’

But Buffonet only repeated stubbornly: ‘I’ve got no kind!’ and continued trudging.

After a time they came to a shop, shadowed and sequestered behind hollyhocks. All the shelves were swept clean, and a few trestle tables folded against the far wall together with an amount of dead ferns heaped in the centre of the floor were the only signs that the shop had once been a living business. A few yards further on a white tea-house with an air of somnolent comfort and a strip of lawn before its windows stood locked and deserted. Another hundred yards brought them to a cross-path, where Buffonet set down the luggage with a thump. ‘Here’s the top, Sur!’ he exclaimed, triumphantly, not bothering to disguise his satisfaction at the end of the job.

Plowart said: ‘I’m afraid you’ve made yourself a lot of enemies over this, Buffonet.’

‘I’m no fool playing about with likes and dislikes. I’ll tell yur, I don’t care who comes to Vachau so long as I eat. This damned place never gave me a living; why should I guard it?’

‘Why, indeed?’ Plowart echoed, smilingly. ‘But some people would call you a scoundrel for saying so.’

Buffonet bit his underlip, then burst out roughly: ‘I’ll be made to pay for this bit of work, don’t worry about that! When I go to the Siren tonight for my nip they’ll be waiting to kick the daylight out of me.’

‘When yur kept out of everything because yur not one of the crowd, it’s not long before yur scrabbling fur farthings at any old jobs. What does it matter so long as yur pay my price?’

‘Yes,’ Plowart said softly. ‘But you make the mistake of being the one who pays. An ounce more brain and a little more strength and you’d be the ruler of Vachau, my friend, not its beggar.’ He extracted five pound notes from his crocodile wallet and offered them. ‘Here! This should give you one good week. You have to win sometimes.’

Buffonet stared at the bank notes disbelievingly, then in one enveloping snatch transferred them to his pocket. Plowart

watched him with faint amusement. 'Don't show it at the tavern tonight or it will find somebody else's pocket.'

His porter dug his hands deep in the pockets of the ridiculous raincoat as if to guard against the very thought, and fastened his eyes on his benefactor. 'Yur not giving me this just fur carrying the bags,' he said knowingly. 'What d'yur want from me?'

Plowart let his eyes travel from the head to the feet in their broken shoes and back again. This was the sort of mercenary that had once made wars practical; a tatterdemalion without intelligence, scruples or animal cunning. But, low as he was, the fellow was direct and honest in his distrust of his species and that was a rare recommendation these days. He was spineless and a bonehead, of course, and therefore not even an employable mongrel; but with self-discipline what couldn't he be! Plowart's eyes returned to the face expectantly watching him and shook his head. 'You can't give me any of the things I want,' he said. 'But you can tell me where Christopher Lumas lives.'

Buffonet chuckled admiringly. 'I knew they couldn't block up all the holes against yur,' he exclaimed. 'He's down there, along the middle path. In the hollow past the point.'

Plowart nodded and, picking up his possessions, started off. He felt the man's eyes on his back until he was over a dip and out of sight.

The path he followed eventually deteriorated into a track half-erased by grass that wound along the rim of the cliffs. At various points along the way he leaned over and saw sheer drops of over two hundred feet down to the sea. After a time the trail branched off from the cliffs and descended to a large house at the foot of a grassy slope with a light screen of firs and poplars to one side of it. It was a high house whose walls rose without outhouses or porticos to break their vertical lines. The wall facing him carried a faint coating of blue paint that had lost most of its original body over the course of years. The house communicated age and neglect the instant it was seen.

At closer range the plaster breaking around the windows could be distinguished, together with other finer details . . . A terrace of paving stones, laid in the arc of a spread fan, extended from a pair of high french windows. From the centre of the arc a ribbon of purple stone directed the feet to four slim marble pillars. The pillars were surmounted by an architrave holding a golden boar. A flight of steps beyond the arch went down to a paved garden with three lily pools, a half-dozen lovers' benches and a tiny fountain. At the far end of this, another flight of steps rose to a lawn that finished at the cliff's edge. There, a triumvirate of arches stood to dramatise the meeting of land, sea and air. The arches were linked by wooden trellising that had become as black through the ravages of wind and brine as the iron arches themselves.

The graciousness envisaged in the original planning had long since disappeared. The glass doors of the house were uncleaned, and the terrace in front of them was dappled with dead leafage. Weeds had climbed the pillars of the classical arch and waved freely above the architrave, providing the boar with undergrowth more realistic than its sculptor had allowed for. At either end of the sunken garden the stone steps were bulging platforms of fungi, and the pools and fountain were clogged with rusty tins, lumps of wood and cardboard cartons.

The nauseating smell of stagnant water filled his nostrils as he crossed over to the three arches. Their metal was pitted and corroded with sea salt, while the continual winds of the Channel had tilted them back from the edge. A fingernail run down the side of one was sufficient to cause flakes of rust to fall. The trellising that had brought a touch of the Italianate here came away in his hands at a bare touch.

Plowart looked back at the house with the fragments in his hands. Now that he studied the place he could see that many of the lower windows were broken. One had lost not only its glass but its frame, also; there remained only a blank aperture, open to the world. It was almost a facsimile of the opening through which the old man had entered his nightmare on the

boat. Plowart walked over to the terrace and looked at it, thirty feet above. Straining his head back, he could just see a portion of discoloured ceiling, but the angle prevented him from seeing anything more of the room beyond.

While he was engrossed, the french windows opened to his left. He turned and saw a man leaning against the woodwork of the windows, surveying him with an expression of incredulous gladness that was almost convulsive. He stretched out his hands and cried: 'Plowart! I can't believe you've really come! I argued with myself for days before I posted off that letter; in fact, I delayed so long I thought it would arrive too late to catch you and you'd go elsewhere. You can imagine for yourself the sort of objections likely to be raised when one writes to a public figure like yourself: that one isn't the only fish in the sea . . . you'd be bored with drab mediocrities like Christopher Lumas . . . that your desire for privacy should be respected, and so on without end! But then I thought you would call this negative thinking and say if I wanted to show my admiration for you I should try anyhow!'

'I had no letter from Vachau,' Plowart said. 'I was recommended to see you by a café proprietor on Guernsey. He said you'd probably put me up for a month.'

'Of course I will! Dear Duncan, what a friend he is!' Lumas exclaimed. 'So you didn't read my letter, eh? Well, it doesn't matter because it's had its effect without being read.' His manner had a nervous excitability that matched his words. 'A good thing you didn't read it, if we come down to it! I was sorry as soon as I posted it. It was a trifle too effusive, too florid, and should you have read it before meeting me it would have given you an entirely wrong impression, I assure you. Although I tried to hide the truth from myself when I read it through, the whole thing sounded exactly as if a boy had written it; the thoughts slithered and bounded about everywhere! But I was determined since you were coming to Vachau you'd stay in my house however big a fool I looked in getting you here!'

While he was pouring out this animated spate of words Plowart was studying him with curiosity. He was not particularly impressed with what he saw. The face, lined with acute suffering, had something feverish about it that suggested the suffering was not a thing of the past. This inner conflict gave the face a transparent delicacy reminiscent of the expiring saints sometimes found on medieval religious panels. Only the small, rather brutish eyes flawed the effect.

His age Plowart set at about fifty. Physically, he was wiry, with a sunken chest and curiously bowed legs. Looking down at these legs and noticing how the man used the woodwork behind him for support, Plowart recollected what he had been told about the accident on the cliffs. The man's dress antagonised him more, for he was a picture of gross self-neglect. He was wearing a threadbare flannel jacket and trousers, together with a waistcoat decorated with four ripped pockets. None of these garments looked as though they had been cleaned or pressed since their beginnings. A band of green cloth twisted around his neck swelled above the jacket and disappeared through the cleft of the waistcoat in a cravat whose real function was revealed whenever the cripple turned his neck, exposing wrinkled bare flesh a shirt should have covered. His feet were encased in felt slippers stained black at the toes by perspiration.

If Lumas noticed the distaste on Plowart's face he chose not to acknowledge it. Without any change of tone, he said: 'But I'm keeping you standing! Come inside, Mr Plowart, and make yourself at home.'

Plowart picked up his belongings and followed Lumas through the french windows and into the drawing-room of the house. It was a large high room lit at its far end by an oil lamp. When his eyes were accustomed to the dimness of the interior, he saw a planless jostle of divans, couches, armchairs and pedestals everywhere, all shrouded in grey dust sheets but identifiable. In front of him, Lumas lurched the length of the room, pulling himself along by grasping in turn the high backs

of a line of chairs marshalled down one side of a long dining-table in the centre of the floor. Reaching the last of the line, he swung himself around in mid-air and landed heavily on the chair at the head of the table. He manœuvred his feet under the table and stretched them out with an expression of pain, muttering indistinctly to himself and for a moment oblivious of Plowart's presence. He remembered his manners immediately he was comfortable and turned with an apologetic smile.

'You must forgive me this tedious ritual of getting my legs straight,' he said. 'It's the price a cripple pays every hour of the day. Won't you sit down?'

Plowart saw that unless he offered resistance he would have to endure his host's garrulity for hours, so he said without equivocation: 'If you don't mind, I think I'll simply unpack and go to bed. I'm too tired to talk.'

A petulant expression of disappointment crossed Lumas' face but was quickly suppressed as he pulled himself back to his feet. 'Of course, I should have remembered! You've had a tiring night and day travelling, and here I am wasting your time! I was looking forward to a long stimulating talk, but it can wait until tomorrow when you're more rested.'

Taking the lamp from the table, he led the way to the door. 'I'll show you your room,' he said. 'I must take great care not to tire you out while you're here. You must understand I'm a lonely man, Mr Plowart, and when a lonely man finds company he's liable to become more talkative than he should be.'

'Don't apologise,' Plowart said. 'I'm sorry I had to arrive tired.'

Guided by the lamp, he followed his host across the dark hall and up the broad staircase that started directly opposite the room they had left. Lumas hoisted himself up one stair at a time with the aid of the banisters. As he climbed, the lamp he held in his free hand lit an ascending series of white oblongs on the wall where pictures had once hung, keeping areas of wall clean beneath them.

At the top of the stairs they crossed a corridor and climbed a second and narrower staircase of the type generally leading to servants' quarters. At the top Lumas paused and swung the lamp about, illuminating a second corridor. He peered keenly about him as if searching for something, but the only objects the lamp disclosed were a number of doors, all firmly closed. Plowart noticed the delay was more of a habit than a spontaneous action, because the cripple lowered the lamp almost immediately and took him along the corridor to where a long iron ladder ended just below a closed trapdoor, twenty feet above. The bottom of the ladder was embedded in concrete and the top was riveted to the wall. Beyond the trapdoor, Plowart guessed, was an attic stowed in the high gable of the house.

Lumas rested his weight on the ladder and said: 'An unorthodox approach, I admit, but the room has the distinction of commanding the best view of the sea. As I have not been able to scale this ladder since my accident, also the most private.' He stared at his guest with a twisted smile, adding softly: 'And privacy, I'm informed, is essential to all great things . . . from love to murder.'

Plowart grasped his arm as he turned to go. 'What do you mean precisely?' His voice was toneless.

Lumas detached his fingers with unexpected strength. 'I must warn you about that ladder. On the occasions I've tried to climb it I've fallen each time. No doubt I'll fall again when my desperation becomes great enough. That is, unless you can solve my problem.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Down the corridor, at the head of the stairs, Lumas' voice said: 'The penalty of being too tired to talk, Mr Plowart.'

He stood with his luggage around him until he heard the steps fading down the stairs. When he was alone, he swung himself up the ladder and pushed the trapdoor with all his strength, expecting it would be wedged from years of disuse and with its hinges rusty. Instead, it opened easily and flew

back with a thump on the floor above. As it opened, sunlight instantly streamed over him and down the ladder.

He climbed through the opening, blinking in the brightness, and found the attic carpeted in a delicate egg-shell blue. In the late afternoon's brilliance it was as cheerful and airy as an observatory. The effect was produced by a pair of large windows that reached to the sloping ceiling and continued several feet overhead. The lower panes looked down on the ocean outside, stretching motionless into the distance. On the walls were delicate water-colours in gilt frames with a nicety of placing that was feminine. Over in one corner of the attic was a narrow iron bed.

When he crossed to it and turned back the bedclothes he found they were freshly laundered and aired. He replaced them and, after meditating for a moment, inspected the room from one end to the other. The furnishing was sparse but tasteful. In one corner stood a pinewood wardrobe and, beside it, a washstand with a large china bowl and a matching blue jug filled with water. In the centre of the room a worn leather armchair had been placed to catch the sun. The only other item was a small reading-table with a candle on it beside the bed. The candle was half burned. Plowart turned away thoughtfully, then crossed to the washstand and took a mouthful of water from the jug. It was fresh.

The bed reminded him of his weariness, but before he allowed himself to rest he went down the ladder and brought up his luggage piece by piece. This done, he lowered the trap-door and bolted it, noticing idly that the metal socket taking the bolt had been twisted, as if some heavy pressure had been used on the door at some time to force it open. He shrugged, then walked over to the bed and flung himself down on it, sprawling full-length with his face buried in the pillows. The linen was cool against his face and the springs yielded under him, supporting his chest and legs and making them comfortably weightless. Down one side of his face the sun intruded, and he turned away further into the pillows.

Although his body found comfort, his mind resisted it. It fumbled from one incident to another of the journey that had led him here. All of them were without consequence and were relinquished one by one. When the last of them had been given up, his consciousness began to walk away a few steps and then come back. Each time it happened, he felt the shape of himself broaden into nothingness as it left him and then slowly retake shape as it returned. He smiled dreamily, playing with the sensations. It was like water, ebbing and returning: not much at a time but always going a little further away and taking a little longer to come back. It reminded him of the effect of the anæsthetic he had been given at that hospital seven years ago. When it had been administered, he had found an agony beyond physical pain . . . Merely recalling it was sufficient to make him stir and open his eyes!

Plowart had wanted the anæsthetic at first. For eight days and eight nights he had put up with the pain that never ceased and never slowed, and in the end it had turned him into another being that cringed and cowered at the consequences of every movement he was forced to make.

He had found the abscess nesting in the shadow of his right armpit one morning when it was smaller than a thrush's egg. As soon as he touched it, a harpoon of agony went through his body and he'd shuddered and sunk back in his bed. It quietened when he left it alone and he imagined it would go of its own accord, but instead it grew larger through the course of the day and when he went back to bed he had to sleep with his arm over the pillow. The following day it reached its height and he could not walk in the days or sleep in the nights. The landlady had found him raving in his room, finally, and hysterically called an ambulance to take him to hospital. It was as well she did, for by then it had become the incarnation of everything that opposed him and he would have died rather than call for help himself!

When he heard they intended to lance it, the thought of steel cutting into the tightly coiled agony almost made him

faint. He had shouted to the doctors that he must have a general anæsthetic because a local one would not completely evacuate him from the scene when it was attacked. The instant the rubber mask was placed over his face he had gulped the gas frantically in his eagerness to be gone. It was then, when his throat and lungs were choked with ether, that he found the real agony and tried to refuse its agent, but when he struggled he found that his body had been strapped. He had discovered that an anæsthetic meant losing one's mind and had almost died of fright because not one of the doctors or nurses knew what his mind represented; they were treating it as carelessly, as ignorantly, as any other specimen that had come under their hands! Since struggling was useless, he persuaded himself that if he exerted his will he could throw back the gas and his mind would keep its sovereignty. But the devastating knowledge that if he did so he would be awake under the mask when the scalpel was used made him desist. That was how his mind was taken. He watched it happen and had never forgotten or forgiven that violation. He had tried to hold it together with his two hands, but it was useless. His mind was ripped apart, cell by cell, in lumps and pieces, until he had nothing whatever and had fallen backward into oblivion.

The remembrance, recapturing the horror of the original experience, made him start up on the bed and throw off the sleep that was overtaking him. He turned on his back and looked at the ceiling. 'That damned abscess!' The humiliation of suffering that downfall through such a triviality could still rankle! His eyes moved restlessly over the ceiling and about the room. Eventually his gaze fell on the first of the water-colours and, in an attempt to obliterate the memory, he concentrated his vision on trying to separate the significance of each brush stroke. From his position at the other side of the room this was impossible; in fact the whole thing was just a chaotic mass. He climbed off the bed and crossed the room to examine it. The painting was supposed to be of a forest glade with a fallen tree and sunbeams penetrating through leaves and

undergrowth. He moodily walked over to the next picture, representing the sun descending behind the crest of a hill with a ploughed field in the foreground. The third effort depicted a lake with fishermen casting nets. All three reeked of preciousness and he stepped back feeling intensely irritated, wondering why they had been painted or hung and whether they really did affect other people. He always felt that they were all part of a gigantic hoax, designed to cheat people out of living but intrinsically without meaning.

Yes, a symphony or a music-hall tune could arouse a pleasant response the first time, possibly a second time; but after this there was nothing more to be gained from it except a renewed irritation at each repetition. Paintings were the same. 'They don't mean a cursed thing!' he muttered, staring at the glade scene.

It came off the wall easily, and he twisted it over to see if there was a signature or title on the back. There was neither, but the hanging cord got tangled between his legs, increasing his exasperation. The things were a nuisance besides a mockery!

In a rising fury he threw the picture on the bed, and went on to pull down the second picture so violently that the nail holding it was wrenched from the wall and with it a small mist of plaster. Plowart flung this picture on top of the first, breaking its glass. 'Never mind! Nobody's going to cry over it!' he exclaimed. He turned to the last picture and wrenched this off the wall also; then, gathering them together and piling the broken glass on top, he climbed down to the landing below and put them in a corner. As he straightened up he heard a stair-rod creak and stiffened, but hearing nothing more he climbed hurriedly back into the attic.

Without the pictures the room had lost some of its elegance and only the blue carpet made it look at all comfortable. Scuffing the edge of it with the toe of his shoe, he decided to get rid of this, too. It was also spurious. He acted immediately, and began to pull it from beneath the wardrobe and the washstand. It was a difficult business in the restricted space because

it covered the entire floor and he had to shift the furniture around to get it free. When he had accomplished the task and dumped the carpet downstairs with the pictures he was perspiring. But the sight of the bare walls and floorboards that met him when he came up again, repaid his efforts.

‘That’s it; as bare as a monk’s cell!’

Coming on top of the first weariness, his exertions left him drained with the suddenness of a fainting fit. A little surprised, he propped himself against the wardrobe for a moment as his mind emptied, then he lay on the bed and started to undress with the wavering methodicalness of discipline holding back exhaustion. He felt the last of his energy going as he unbuttoned his shirt, shifting from one elbow to the other to free himself of it. When he was down to his underpants and climbing between the clean sheets, he was gasping with the effort of controlling the oncoming surge of sleep. His resistance ended as his head touched the pillow.

Three

When he awoke the room was bright with morning sunlight. He opened his eyes, blinked blindly in the glare, and defensively covered his face with a bare arm. After a while, the recollection of where he was aroused him completely, and glancing at his watch he saw it was eight o'clock. He had slept over twelve hours then: double the time he usually allowed for sleep. He rolled over on his side and found that without stirring his head from the pillows, he was able to see the ocean, glowing and quiet beyond the windows. It was almost a summer's morning, full of silence and untroubled distances, and nearly windless. With sudden resolution he threw back the bedclothes and got up.

Under his bare feet the floorboards were warm when he crossed to the washstand. He half-filled the bowl and, while the water was still swaying, plunged his face in several times and dried himself. There were no heating arrangements so he had to shave in cold water, and he cut himself twice. The cuts were one above the other and in the oval frame of a pocket mirror he watched the blood mingle and trickle down his cheek. After a few moments he opened one of the windows and stood naked in front of it, letting the air play on his face. In the sunlight the blood was luminous and alive. When it came to his jaw it hesitated, then spilled on to his neck in a rush. Before it had gone a quarter of an inch it froze and turned black. He peeled it off with his fingernail and examined it, frowning. Congealed, it was anything at all. It could have been a flake of old paint or a piece of shell from the back of a beetle. It had no special characteristic that made it easily recognisable as the liquid of life. Its colour and character had

changed immediately it had stopped. But the same was true of all living forms once their vitality stopped, of course. In the case of men, the greatest in history were those most dynamic in their actions. When the razor slash of circumstance separated them from the current, these were the few who refused to stop. But not even the greatest of them had managed to stay alive long enough to control eternity itself. And until the time when there were no more deaths, there would be no greatness.

This hard speck of blood was the story of the bulk of humanity; safe and sure when guided along the circumscribed veins and arteries of a civilisation's traditions, strengthened by the orthodox institutions of opinion—as the blood is re-conditioned by the heart—but doomed the moment it was out of its tunnels. Was the trouble a sense of inadequacy? Through history, only the few had kept moving, questioning and challenging. This, and only this, distinguished the leaders from the led, the living from the dead.

He flicked the dried blood away and from the suitcase took out a pair of faded blue swimming trunks, a pair of light, rope-soled espadrilles and a bathing robe. With these on, he slipped a pair of sunglasses into the gown pocket, together with a packet of cigarettes and matches. Just in case he was bored, he decided to take reading matter also, and from the magazines he had brought he selected an Anarchist journal and a few old numbers of a publication advancing the cause of World Government. He left the room through the floor, like a pantomime devil.

He met nobody going through the house. On the terrace he paused irresolutely, then decided to take the route he already knew going along the cliffs past the garden. Somewhere along it, he surmised, there must be a way of descending to the outlying rocks where he could find a natural pool to swim. At several likely looking places he worked his way down a few feet but each time found the cliffs too steep and smooth and was forced to return. When the path finally turned away inland, he left it and struck off across rough gorse. The earth

rose and dipped as unexpectedly as a fairground switchback and he was forced to run at breakneck speed down steep slopes and, on reaching bottom, begin climbing the looming shoulders of new promontories. In places the cliffs ran as straight as a knife cut, but more often they went wandering out into long peninsulas that left the mass of the island behind, reminding him of the sprawling limbs of a titanic sleeper. He explored patiently all the way along until he succeeded in finding a safe descent.

Plowart was disappointed in his search for a pool. The only natural basin that he found deep enough for a swimmer was too narrow, more indeed of a cleft between boulders than a pool. The water in it was green and tempting. Lying on the bottom was a black and malignant lobster. The lobster lay close to a rock shelf. When he lowered his face to the water he could see several large claws protruding from beneath the shelf. Overcome by curiosity, Plowart bent closer still until his face suddenly touched the water and he drew back with instant repugnance, feeling a physical connection had been established between himself and the sinister inscrutability of the crustaceans below. He turned away, wiping his face with the bottom of his robe.

At the edge of the sea he decided the tide was running too swiftly to risk a plunge, and gave up the idea of a morning swim. For half an hour or so he perched on the rocks, smoking cigarettes and watching the sea go past, hissing and fuming. When he tired of the spectacle he went on with his exploration, jumping from one rock to another in the direction the water was taking. In the middle of one of these jumps his eye caught a bizarre colour and he teetered dangerously and nearly fell when he landed. He walked back and found the dried husk of a crab between a collection of pebbles left by the last tide. It was a vivid green. The shell had been shattered, and splinters of it were lying several feet away. In addition to this damage, one of its legs had been broken off and was lying close to the head. There was no sign of animation about the relic at all.

But when Plowart stirred the shell with his fingertip, the remaining legs promptly clenched and raised the thing. Amazed, Plowart watched the remnants of a crab, to all appearances dead, wobble off among the rocks. This manifestation of life where none should have remained baffled and disgusted him.

A little further along the shore he came to a large number of grey and black boulders sweeping in a packed mass from the base of the cliffs to the water's edge. The boulders were so uniform and symmetrical they resembled a division of tanks petrified at the moment of assaulting the ocean. The boulders actually in the water were decked in skirts of evil black weed that released an all-pervading stench of decay, growing more unbearable the closer they were approached.

Retreating from this odour, he noticed that the cliff face, fifty yards on, offered no obstacles to a diagonal climb. Over the years vast sections of the face had collapsed, leaving a slope with irregular platforms all the way to the top. He began the climb without delay. When he was a hundred feet above the shore he found a natural garden, about twenty yards long. Obviously the soil was prodigiously fertile, for flowers waved in multicoloured profusion with a radiance to their petals unequalled by any other wild flowers he had seen. It was a mystery how the flowers could grow with solid rock not more than three inches beneath them and exposed to the full force of the sea winds. But, whatever the answer, it was as if the whole richness of this barren island had been concentrated into a single natural cornucopia whose prodigal splendour, yard by yard, matched the finest gardens of the Italian Riviera. He drew the heel of his espadrille through the earth and took a pinch between his fingers. It was perceptibly moist and viscous. He threw it back and, feeling too contented to go on exploring, sat down, using the magazines as a seat.

While he was savouring this garden on the cliff, he was disturbed by the sound of shoes scraping against the rocks beneath. Irritated, he looked down and saw two boys scrambling

up the rocks and making directly for him. When they were close enough to be observed in more detail he saw that they were grimy, slightly tattered and uncombed. Both were dressed identically in khaki shorts, woollen jumpers and sandals, suggesting they were twins. The only distinction was in the colour of their jumpers. One wore green and the other brown. They were about sixteen or seventeen, he thought.

When they reached the garden, both came running over and stopped dead a few feet in front of him. The boy in the brown jumper said provocatively: 'Well, what do you say?'

Plowart said dangerously: 'Get away from me or you'll be sorry!'

The boy nodded and turned to his brother. 'Just as she said! He *is* annoyed.'

'But you provoked him!' the other protested. 'He might have been quite cheerful if you hadn't said anything, Benjamin.'

Plowart's exasperation changed to interest. Their voices were soft and cultured, completely belying their grimy appearance. The gravity of their conversation together with an indifference to his presence gave them a self-sufficiency he found very attractive. The differences between them were unmistakable now. Although both had dark, gifted faces, the boy called Benjamin had blue eyes while his brother's were brown. Benjamin had a nose that was small and perfect, giving his face a fineness that was almost feminine. His brother's nose was arrogant, foreshadowing maturity and strength; the promise of strength, however, was diluted by dreamy, visionary eyes with over-large pupils. Benjamin's were steady and probing, and these qualities doubtless assigned to him the natural leadership. Both had undeveloped mouths, brown flesh and hard straight bodies.

'Who's this oracle of yours?'

They laughed together. Benjamin said: 'No good!' His brother hooted: 'Business bankrupt! Pull the shutters down!'

He shook his head impatiently and said: 'Don't be childish. We're all too old for mystifications.'

'Mystifications! That's a nice word,' Benjamin's brother said, 'Mystifications! I must add it to my collection.'

'You *are* an idiot, Jonathan,' Benjamin said scornfully. He turned to Plowart and said: 'He wants to be a *raconteur*, so he learns terribly winding stories and embellishes them with impossible words because he thinks erudition and artistry belong together. He leeches on to everybody's vocabulary, then throws it up in the next story he tells.'

'Regurgitates it, Benjamin,' Jonathan said reproachfully, throwing himself down beside Plowart.

'You haven't answered my question,' Plowart said. 'Who is this oracle of yours?'

'Claremont!' Benjamin shrugged. 'Well, since our revered father hasn't been home for six years and mother's dead, that makes her our mentor—in a manner of speaking.'

'Not the only one, judging by your public school accents.'

Jonathan said proudly: 'We're at Harrow. We go back the day after tomorrow.'

'Anyhow,' Benjamin said, 'Claremont was showing us how to tell the time with jars of water when Jonathan saw you going along the shore. We all guessed in turn what your reaction would be if you were "jumped". Jonathan said you'd be fatherly and use the fat manner. He would, of course, because he's a fathead himself. I thought you would be quite dead and negative, because I've sharper eyes and I could see your face was as stiff as a mandarin's. When I say dead, I mean lost to everything outside your own thoughts.'

'Then you should say preoccupied, not dead!' Jonathan interjected.

'Why did she say I would be annoyed?'

'It's the way you go over the rocks,' Benjamin said. 'You timidly edge forward as if you're only going to take a tiny hop, then at the last moment you take a gigantic leap. We watched you doing it for five minutes and it was always the same.'

According to Claremont, fear is your strongest characteristic and you can only go forward by a desperate explosion of will. She said it was probably the same in everything you did.'

The boy relayed this in a casual, indifferent tone that reduced the matter to something academic.

Plowart made his own tone just as even and calm: 'All on the strength of a stranger jumping from one rock to another, eh? Supposing it were true, would she be clever enough to find a remedy?'

Benjamin raised his eyebrows at a breach of good taste. 'If she sees the trouble, she knows the answer,' he said judiciously.

'Then perhaps she can be my mentor, too. I should like to meet her.'

Jonathan said: 'The wish isn't reciprocated. That's why she didn't come.'

'I'll give you a pound each if you take me along to meet her.'

Benjamin said with disapproval: 'We don't take money.'

'A fiver apiece! We needn't tell her, of course.'

Jonathan got to his feet and slipped his arm through his brother's, looking down on Plowart superciliously. 'Is he trying to bribe us, would you say?'

'Evidently.'

'Then he's a dirty beast, Benjamin! Quite odious and intolerable to the nostrils, don't you agree?'

Warned by a blur of movement, they ducked instinctively and the magazines flew over their heads. After one quick look at Plowart's impassioned face, they turned and fled. They stopped when they saw he was not pursuing them and conferred. The verdict was unanimous, and they stooped and quickly gathered handfuls of pebbles. Then from a safe distance they began to bombard him. More by luck than judgment he dodged most of the stones, but when the boys had almost exhausted their ammunition, one of the pebbles

struck him on the forehead, releasing an instant torrent of blood. He swayed and almost fell, but a gust of rage swept back the faintness. Reaching down he grabbed a jagged piece of rock, as large as a brick, and hurled it at Jonathan, who was nearest. The rock would have split his head open had it connected, but instead it flew between the brothers and fell harmlessly ten yards past them. It was close enough, however, to startle them into realising the maniacal lengths of Plowart's fury. Appalled by the revelation, they turned and ran pellmell down the rocks. A fusillade of stones that sang, bounced and ricocheted around their heads accompanied them, jeopardising their descent.

He stopped only when they were too far away to hit. Holding his thudding chest, he stared down until they reached the bottom, as diminutive as pygmies. They struck a path along the side of the sea and jog-trotted along it one behind the other, presumably heading for home and safety.

'Guttersnipes!' He collected his magazines from where he had flung them but, finding several of their pages were ripped and dirty, he threw them angrily down the rocks. He continued his climb until, fifty feet above the last platform, he came to an end. Clutching the roots of a bush and with his feet wedged in a small crevice he looked up. There was no further point of leverage, just a bald flat face soaring over him; he turned back, cursing softly. He could not return to the easy diagonal route over to his right and had to traverse an untried course.

The journey down was a succession of slippery surfaces, lost footholds and difficult jumps. In places he had to twist himself between parallel rocks and descend using alternate pressure on his feet and back. He did not fall, but he was considerably begrimed when he reached the bottom.

On the low rocks bordering the sea he pulled off his bathing gown and ducked his head and arms in the icy water. It had the stimulating effect of a hypodermic injection, sending tingling threads of ice and fire through his body. He dried

himself on the outside of the gown, then slung it loosely over his shoulders and set off back to the house.

All the way back he thought about the woman called Claremont whose depth of perception had torn aside the protective layers around his self-division. He scowled as he walked, trying to imagine her. The boys had described her as their mentor, so her personality was essentially didactic. But their remarks had also suggested that her mind was sufficiently flexible to make the association between the three both companionable and enjoyable. A strange mingling of superiority and equality, then! Before their lapse into hooliganism, both boys had shown an abnormal precocity and this undoubtedly had been directly stimulated by their Claremont. Certainly that sort of product was beyond Harrow's capabilities! The aura of brilliance that had struck him when listening to the boys' conversation had been all the more exotic because knowledge had been trained up the green stem of imagination. Generally as the one advanced the other retreated—but she had prevented that. But for what purpose? To suit whose palate? The two questions took him on to a third, containing the solution to them all and throwing him into sudden excitement.

How could any woman judge a complicated fork in the personality of a stranger solely through seeing him leaping from rock to rock, unless she was just as exceptional as himself! That was the crux of it . . .

She had a powerful mind, then. The problem of such minds was their perpetual hunger, their need for other compatible minds to keep them vigorous. But Vachau was a remote island completely lacking in this respect. Very well, in the absence of such fellow minds and on the understanding that a dearth of speculative conversation was the first step to stagnation, what did one do? He posed this fourth question even as he found its answer. 'Train the most malleable minds available! Minds without dogmas, reluctances or hesitations. The minds of young, impressionable boys!'

The subtlety of encouraging precocity in young boys to fill an intellectual vacuum filled him with admiration. Such an idea was worthy of a man. But she imagined she could analyse and dismiss him while remaining unknown, did she! In that alone, her optimism was a woman's. She had forgotten that in developing the brothers she could never remain unnoticed, for the leaf identifies the tree every time! And if she could see his torture in one quick glance, then she must know its remedy . . .

He had reached the garden now, and he walked through it deep in thought. The french windows were ajar, and when he pulled them open and entered the dark drawing-room he found Christopher Lumas sitting on his high chair at the end of the table. The paraffin lamp was smoking badly, filling the room with unhealthy fumes and making him cough as he stepped over the threshold. But Lumas was indifferent to the foul atmosphere: he was voraciously eating a mixture of fried peppers, aubergines and sliced bananas. Beside the lamp was a larger plate with a heaped mound of the same foods. He looked up jocularly at Plowart's entrance, suspending his fork in mid-air: 'Ah, you're just in time for breakfast, Mr Plowart. It's not much, nothing more than a bachelor's concoction, but what can one do while a wife's away!'

'Thanks.' Plowart pulled out the chair he had used the day before and sat down. 'Where is she?'

The cripple laid down his fork and winked. 'Visiting her parents on Guernsey. When I heard about that café quarrel yesterday and I knew who was on the way here, I sent her off for the night. She should be back within an hour.'

He caught up a curving bottle of oil and, suspending it over the second plate, tipped a golden stream over the pinks, greens, yellows and purples heaped on it, lighting them into a glistening translucence. He passed the plate over, then resumed eating. He ate noisily, with pieces of food spilling from his mouth back on to the plate, his lips and chin shiny from the oil.

'That was considerate,' Plowart said. 'But I don't see why she should be kept out of the way.'

'She wouldn't want me to offer you hospitality, that's why.' He scraped up the last of his food, then wiped his lips and chin with a piece of bread and stuffed this into his mouth also. 'But now you're installed, there's not much she can do!' Plowart lifted his eyebrows. 'Is my reputation so bad?'

'She knows nothing about politics. She just doesn't like outsiders queering her pitch.' He looked at Plowart's plate as he spoke. The food on it was still untouched, for he had only pretended to eat. Lumas asked: 'Aren't you hungry?'

'No; I've lost my appetite.'

'My eating disgusts you, I suppose?' Without waiting for an answer, he seized the plate and began to fork the food into his mouth ravenously.

Plowart shrugged indifferently. It was quite true, the man's swinish habits had nauseated him. 'Yes, if you like.'

'I disgust everyone; there's no reason why you should be the exception. That's why I never eat in company. But what do I care! If you're treated like a pig you act like one.'

With or without a saint's face the man was gross and sickening. He bent his head so he could stuff the greasy food into his mouth more easily, and raised it only when he wanted to address a remark, exactly like a pig waiting for another bucket of slush to be thrown in its trough.

'Who treats you like a pig?'

'My wife, of course. She's not altogether wrong, I admit. Why, I even regard myself as a pig now. When I first came to Vachau I was a clean fellow, but my habits have sadly deteriorated.' He chuckled. 'Now they're mud!' He pushed the second plate away with a sigh of repletion, then fixed his eyes on his guest's face. 'When something collapses at a man's centre, his manners are the least of the things he loses, Plowart.'

Plowart said contemptuously: 'I don't understand.'

'That's because you've got no pity. And if you had, then you'd suffer a collapse yourself! Compassion is the ability to

understand what damages us and, by understanding it, refusing to condemn or stop the damage from continuing. That's been my story, Plowart. It's the crucifixion of all sensitive men.'

Plowart had been studying the table top with its pattern of circular stains, puzzled by their origin. He had just recognised them as the marks left by innumerable cups of hot coffee and tea, when Lumas raised the issue of compassion. He looked up sharply and, meeting his gaze, Lumas reached forward and lowered the lamp wick, so that the light retreated from his face. But Plowart could see the muscles of his cheeks working convulsively, even in the shadow.

'I know how your mind works, Plowart; you think it's weakness to love, don't you? Everything I've read about you breaths of self-sufficiency and scorn of others. It was the same for me, too. That's why I sold my businesses and came here when the war was over—to get away from people and their stupidities. Like you, it was ideas I was interested in, and humanity and its anxieties were all a waste of time. What you are today I was in 1946 when I was forty-two. For two years I read everything, went back to the dawn of man and retraced history to the present. Through the days and the nights I read and made incessant notes until my fingers ached and my brain was so dulled I didn't bother to undress when I went to bed. Just like you today, I know.'

'Don't make the mistake of thinking we're the same, Lumas. You were never like me,' Plowart said.

Lumas said excitedly: 'Well, you'll find out what I did: ideas aren't enough. At the end of those two years I was running away from myself and this lonely house, looking for humanity wherever I could find it . . . trying to lose myself in it! One day I met a strange sympathetic girl on Guernsey who inexplicably understood me, and the emptiness of the world became filled with goodness, tenderness and love. She listened to all I had to say, and by running her white fingers through my hair healed me! Does that seem possible to you, Plowart?'

'No,' Plowart said, smiling and lighting a cigarette. 'Not in

any real sense, anyhow. You were just over-emotional from loneliness and put the girl on a pedestal. It happens every day.'

'She healed me, I tell you!' Suddenly conscious that he was shouting, the cripple lowered his voice. 'But what does it matter whether you believe that or not! After two years of courting her, we married and I brought her to Vachau. She found me fascinating and worldly and used to sit on my lap in this very room with her arm around my neck, kissing me as I talked. If only you knew how cold ideas are compared with the soft, yielding flesh of a young woman! I reached the stage where the sound of her feet along a passageway, the call of her voice from the garden, the touch of her lips in the dark, abolished any other heaven or the possibility of being without her.'

The man's maudlin story made Plowart shift uncomfortably in his seat, and wonder when the story would reach its end.

'She couldn't have enough of my company, I tell you! And then she changed, when I was as deeply lost in loving her as a man with the swamp over his head, and as far beyond recovery. Within two years of our marriage she couldn't bear to have me in the same room, and every word I spoke made her wince, as if my very existence represented her humiliation! There was nothing to account for it. Nothing! When I came into the bedroom at night, she buried her face in the pillows pretending to be asleep so I wouldn't touch her. I took her by force each time and went to sleep with the sound of her crying in my ears . . .'

The cripple groaned, struggling to regain his self-control, before he went on.

'I began drinking heavily to find relief from myself, and one night I found myself down the cliffs with my legs smashed. When I got up from my sickbed six months later I was not only a cripple but as impotent as an old man. That was the end of our nominal intimacy, so she took her interest elsewhere. It was not long before I discovered she had taken a

lover and I was being cuckolded. Even though I was the laughing stock of Vachau, I forgave her. I begged her to be faithful to me and scorn the flesh but she turned away and refused to speak about it.' .

Plowart listened coldly. The pedantic, melodramatic phrasing of the tale and the ridiculous 'devices' the man was using to win his sympathy were laughable. He said: 'What did you do?'

'Gave her an ultimatum. I said: "Give this man up or give me up." With that peculiarly feminine instinct for seizing the best opportunity regardless of cruelty, she said she would leave immediately . . .

'But I was too clever for her. The truth about women is that given a certain amount of power they will use it against their lovers; but let them have absolute power to destroy, and they will fail every time through pity. That's what I relied on to trap her and it paid me handsomely.

'While she was packing after a day and night of arguments, I fell on my knees in a storm of tears and self-reproaches. I told her I should commit suicide if she left me, and that if she would only stay with me I would object to nothing she did. I'm not ashamed to say I whined, snivelled, grovelled and howled like a child. It succeeded where any other argument would have failed. In the middle of packing her clothes she paused and turned a deathly pale, and I thought she would actually faint. But instead she rested her hand on my head for a moment, then emptied her suitcases on our bed and left the room, with tears running down her face.'

'So you won after all, you wily old devil!' Plowart had listened to this recital with growing interest, fascinated by the man's cunning. He found the creature both comic and horrible, but it was difficult to tell where he was one and where the other as these aspects were continually blending into one another by the shading of an inflexion or a slight modulation of his voice.

Lumas struck the table a sudden blow with the flat of his hand that echoed through the room with a decisive crack. He

said angrily: 'I lost! She stayed on here with two reservations, that she had her own bedroom, and had complete freedom to do what she wished. For six years now her lover has come to Vachau; twice a year he comes, each time for a fortnight. And I have to endure it! Every day she becomes more beautiful, maddening me with her untouchability: then there comes the time when she grows soft and radiant, and I know he's sent word that he's coming . . . She walks about the house like a ripe plum waiting to be eaten by this thief who steals over on his boat to take what's mine.'

'Who is he?'

'A tomato grower! I've never seen him, but I know when he's within five miles of Vachau. Your visit coincides with our friend's, Plowart. You'll see by my wife's happiness exactly when he lands.'

'What has this got to do with me?'

'I want you to stop the affaire, Plowart. Because I love her, I haven't interfered. But I can't let it go on any longer, or it will destroy me. I must have my share of happiness, too!'

Plowart said levelly: 'Your domestic squabbles don't concern me. Bringing erring wives to heel isn't my speciality, I'm afraid.'

Lumas looked down at his hands and placed them flat on the table. Before they came to rest, however, Plowart saw they were shaking. He said: 'Your party needs funds, I believe. Would you refuse if I offered £800 for general campaign expenses?'

Plowart studied him for a moment, then laughed mirthlessly. 'You're not handicapped by scruples, I see.'

Lumas said fiercely: 'Neither are you. That's why I was excited when I read in the newspapers that you intended to come here for your holiday. I started following your activities five years ago when you started your party. I tell you I know more of your aims and intentions than your own lieutenants!'

'What are my intentions?' Plowart asked softly, leaning forward.

'Nothing will content you except supreme authority to alter the State to your own ideals! You're a menace to our civilisation, Plowart . . . a fanatic beginning his climb to power under a cloak of fine-sounding speeches. You've fooled everyone so far, but not me! If you help keep this man from my wife, Britain can go to her damnation for all I care. I'll let you have money and I'll keep silent. If you refuse . . .' he chuckled slyly. 'I'll begin commenting on your speeches in the correspondence columns of the Press. It's odd how blind people are, Plowart, until a matter is drawn to their attention.'

Plowart nodded reflectively. 'So this is the explanation of your hospitality,' he said. 'I find you a pitiful specimen, with your bribes and threats. Don't you realise how ineffectual they are? You have neither the weapons nor the provisions to hinder me or help me forward an inch. And why should I help solve your marital troubles? Because I pity you? That's no argument; I don't pity you a jot. You lost your wife because you disintegrated into a womanish fool with your head full of nonsense about love and nothing else. That's a woman's outlook, so how do you expect a woman to respect it in a man? It's the same with your bribes and threats—they're womanish!' He smiled and stubbed out his cigarette on one of the plates. 'If you want a word of advice, I should recommend you not to point a popgun at a flame-thrower!' He stood up and smoothed his gown. 'I'll look around for another room this afternoon and perhaps you can find someone else to act as deputy husband!'

Lumas stared at him, his mouth slowly opening with dismay. 'Wait a moment, Plowart. I apologise sincerely . . . you've misunderstood me . . .'

At this point the french windows opened, interrupting his apologies. Both men looked up as a tall, stately woman with black heavy hair falling around a white face stepped in from the sunlight. She looked about her with perplexity, for with the lamp lowered, the room was darker than normal. She

could see her husband beside the lamp, but Plowart, sitting further away, was not visible.

Lumas conjured up an ingratiating smile for her as she looked at him. 'Welcome back, my love! The house has insisted on being a mausoleum since you left it.'

'Thank you.' She spoke softly, rather abstractedly, turning to shut the windows behind her. 'Would you turn the lamp a little higher, please?'

Lumas did as she asked and the circle of light expanded to reveal Plowart, who had risen at her entrance. He smiled politely, meeting her startled eyes. She was as ugly as the café proprietor had said. Her face, however, had the cold regality and indifference often to be seen in court portraits, and it was this that made the lady's distinction. She had high asiatic cheekbones, thin curved eyebrows and long eyelashes. The eyes were brown ovals that dilated when startled, as they were now, and the mouth was full and sensual. She had removed a long scarf from her shoulders as she entered and this she was still trailing in one hand. The slight movement of its swinging attracted his eyes to her full curved body clothed in black. She looked away from him without a greeting and turned to Lumas inquiringly.

Her effect on the cripple was remarkable. As soon as she had entered the room he had become galvanised with a patently artificial geniality and solicitude. He was rubbing his hands as he nodded at Plowart. 'There! I thought I should surprise you, my dear. This is Peter Plowart, a very distinguished political man from London. Everybody talks of him as one of the brightest luminaries in the capital. He's going to stay on Vachau for a whole month before he goes into Parliament. Mr Plowart, this is my wife.'

Plowart and the lady bowed slightly. He was aware that his appearance had mystified her, and was faintly amused, but he did not allow this to show on his face as he raised his head. She had already impressed him as a withdrawn personality of the type that rarely allowed thoughts and ideas to be spontaneously

communicated and avoided close relationships. She had obviously never heard of him before, so his presence could not fail to bewilder her. Another fact that struck him was that his host had not mentioned that he was staying as his guest and had introduced him in such a way that it could be assumed he was boarding elsewhere and had merely called for an idle chat. If Lumas' manner was any guide, as he followed his wife's departure from the room with an unblinking, dog-like stare, he was a man obsessed. His description of his wife as a beautiful woman when she was, in fact, clearly ugly, pointed to the same conclusion.

Lumas was apologetic when they were alone again. 'You must excuse her for small breaches of etiquette,' he whispered. 'It's not that she dislikes you; she merely likes to be alone.'

'I understand,' Plowart said.

The cripple would have gone on, but she reappeared with an apron about her waist. She began to gather up the plates and cutlery from the table with a briskness and an air of absorption that entirely excluded the two men. Lumas watched her intently then exclaimed with his forced joviality: 'Not much to wash there, my sweet. I all but licked them clean, eh?'

She paused for a moment in what she was doing to eye Plowart covertly from under her lashes. 'Did you not eat, Mr Plowart?'

'I'm afraid not. I lost my appetite.'

'Oh! I'm sorry.'

Lumas laughed gaily. 'I told him I was a pig.'

'You shouldn't keep saying that! It's a degrading thing to say.'

'But I'm a degraded creature, my darling! Isn't that the truth—with my legs, my house, my wife and my life?'

'It wasn't your husband's fault entirely, Mrs Lumas.' Plowart watched her shrewdly. 'I wasn't at all hungry when I sat down.'

Her face was quite impassive and not a shadow of distaste

had crossed it when her husband had referred to himself as a pig, and even her verbal objection had been mechanical. He wondered what had induced her to marry the man; or for that matter what had died in him since he had come to live on Vachau. Although she was no beauty, she had a natural pride and dignity that redeemed her. Lumas was entirely different, and it was quite understandable why he clung to his wife with such tenacity, for he was mentally, morally, physically and spiritually a ruin of what a man should be.

'Please call me Anne; I much prefer it.' Plowart bent his head in assent. The informality of offering her Christian name to a stranger ran so counter to her nature it offered only one answer. She had asked him to call her Anne because she did not like to be associated with her husband's name. The same thing had struck the cripple, for his eyes half-closed in pain, but he recovered himself instantly and started to speak with feverish gaiety.

'I was telling Plowart all about your love affaire when you burst in on us, my star! He's very interested, and now he's seen you I'm sure he envies the third party immensely!' He turned to Plowart and said loudly: 'Don't you think my wife is an extraordinary beauty?'

Anne said quietly: 'I'm sure Mr Plowart is not really interested.'

As she went out with the plates, Lumas called after her: 'Of course he is! Everybody is interested in a *ménage à trois*! You mustn't be shy about your seductiveness, my darling. If we unburden ourselves to Plowart, who knows?—He may be captivated too, then we might have a *ménage à quatre*!' She paused at the door with her back to them and the plates in her hands, then she wheeled and fixed a burning glance on him. 'You must stop making remarks like that, Christopher,' she said. 'Consider my feelings, for God's sake!'

Feigning embarrassment, the cripple squirmed and said: 'What did I say that was so wrong?'

'A *ménage à quatre*. That was intolerable, and if you repeat

it ever again I shall leave you! Why must you make disgraceful scenes in front of strangers! And this would not be a *ménage à trois* if you'd not insisted I stay.'

'What a fool I am! I'm so used to being by myself I blab without a thought for the consequences. I retract it all immediately! You are right, it was unpardonable. But pigs are unpardonable in everything they do; you must make allowances.'

Almost inaudibly, she said, more to herself than for other ears: 'I do. Constantly.' To Plowart, she said: 'You must forgive us, Mr Plowart. We aren't used to outside company, and Christopher is overwrought.' She turned away from them and left the room with her tall body erect.

Lumas spread his hands in a gesture, saying: 'What can one do?' then pointedly changed the conversation to a more neutral subject. 'I notice you tried bathing this morning. I could have told you it was impossible in these waters. They are too dangerous even for local people familiar with the currents and tides.'

'So I discovered,' Plowart said. 'I spent the morning exploring the shore, instead; and ended up by being hailed with stones by a couple of boys called Benjamin and Jonathan.'

Lumas chuckled. 'I noticed the cut on your forehead when you came in.'

'Who are they?'

'The sons of Sir Arthur Capothy. He owns our island and lives in Athens on the fat of our rents! The boys are looked after by a sister named Claremont.'

Plowart looked at his host with immediate interest. This was the girl, then! 'What's she like? Have you met her?'

'Only when she was a very young girl in her early teens. You forget that since my accident I've not left this house. According to my wife she's about twenty-four and a lovely thing. There's something wrong with her, evidently. She has made herself completely unapproachable, and when anyone goes to her with problems connected with the affairs of Vachau

—she's nominally the head in her father's absence—she refuses to meet them.'

'Where can I find her?'

Lumas considered him with a faint smile that held a world of insinuation. 'What's the hurry, Plowart? Well, that's your own business! She lives at the Seigniory.'

Plowart pushed back his chair. 'I think I'll change and go along there.'

As he left the room Lumas called after him: 'Don't look two ways or you'll come to grief!'

He was in darkness when the door closed behind him. The only illumination in the hall came in a narrow band from a door further down to the right that had been left ajar. As he crossed to the stairs the door opened and the light increased. The white of his gown must have caught the eye of Anne Lumas on her way back to the drawing-room, for he heard her gasp and turn toward him as he mounted the stairs.

'Where are you going?' Her voice was a sharp whisper of surprise. He looked over the banister to where her face was a pale, upturned patch.

'To my room; of course. Your husband neglected to tell you, but while I'm on Vachau I'm staying here.'

'Which room has he given you? Tell me, quickly!'

'The room at the top of the ladder. It's not much but it suits my purposes.'

'No! No, he couldn't! I won't allow it!' Her voice, raised in sudden passion, dropped all pretence of politeness.

'Then I should approach him about it, Madam,' he said coldly. 'The choice was certainly not mine.'

As he climbed the stairs he heard the woman open the door of the drawing-room and address her husband angrily before the door closed, muffling her remonstrations.

Four

After he had bolted the trapdoor and was safe from interruption, he snapped open the lid of the suitcase and scrutinised the order of his belongings packed inside. When he was satisfied that nothing had been disturbed, he disrobed and slipped off his swimming trunks and espadrilles. The rope soles of the espadrilles had been frayed and cut by the sharp rocks and were now almost unwearable. After examining the broken strands he threw the shoes over to one corner of the room and set to work unpacking the suitcase and the canvas hold-all.

He had brought two suits, a sports jacket and flannels, and sundry shirts, underwear, ties, socks and shoes. For his visit to the Seigniory he decided on the sports jacket and flannels with a casual sports shirt and his heaviest pair of walking shoes. The suits he put on hangers in one side of the wardrobe and the other articles went into appropriate compartments provided on the other side.

He had also brought a number of books, the bulk of them crammed into the hold-all. In the main they were old favourites: political theses, credos, pronunciamentos and manifestos of successful and unsuccessful revolutionary parties of a dozen countries. In addition there were volumes on history and economics beside well-thumbed biographies on such personalities as Robespierre, Trotsky, Rasputin and Bismarck. Plowart arranged the books in a long line on the floor close to the bed, with their spines uppermost, using a pair of shoes as a bookend.

With his books and clothes in order, he picked up the damaged radio and before leaving the room paused to memorise how everything was. He had learned the value of doing

that long ago. It was impossible, of course, to prevent inquisitive people from investigating one's property, but it helped to know when it was being done. . . .

At the bottom of the stairs he heard the sound of voices raised in the drawing-room, presumably arguing about his occupation of the attic. When he opened the door he saw the cripple sitting in the same position as when he had left him. He spoke with his eyes fixed on the lamp in front of him, as though afraid of intimidation should he look directly at his wife. Anne Lumas was leaning over him with one hand on the table, speaking with bitter intensity. She saw Plowart immediately he entered and turned to look steadfastly at a painting on the other side of the room, pointedly ignoring him. This action and her sudden silence drew Lumas' attention to him and he became silent also. It was almost a tacit agreement that he was an intruder, sailing with no flags.

The little he had overheard contributed nothing to his understanding. He had simply caught scattered phrases without context to give them sense, such as : 'You mustn't think . . .'; 'I had no way of knowing, my star . . .'; ' . . . Perfectly devilish!' and finally, from Lumas, 'No premeditation at all!' All of the phrases had been uttered with vehemence on the woman's side and a submissive meekness on the part of the cripple. Plowart observed that both, however, were panting and strained when they stopped. He chose to ignore it all, saying cheerfully: 'I'm walking over to the Seigniory. Unless I fall over the cliffs, I shall be back in the evening.' He smiled broadly and walked through the room and out of the french windows without receiving or expecting any response from the briefly separated combatants.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun of the morning had gone behind cloud. Far above him as he walked, Plowart saw the faint scar of a circling falcon. The optimism—it was the only explanation—that drove the bird so high above sea and desolate rocks for food, touched off an echo in himself and he chuckled. The bird swerved again and banked over into the

clouds, leaving him with a trace of regret at the parting of a companion.

‘Have you lost something up there?’

The voice came from his right. He looked around and saw Jonathan straddling the earth bank to one side of the path. He had washed since Plowart had seen him last, and his hair was scrupulously combed.

‘Hallo!’ Plowart said, surprised. ‘I thought we were at one another’s throats?’

‘We changed our minds.’ He jumped down from his perch with youthful agility and skipped alongside. ‘Where are you going?’

When Plowart said he was calling on the Seignior to see his sister, Jonathan merely nodded and said: ‘What’s that you’re carrying?’

‘A radio. I’m trying to get it repaired.’

‘Is it the one Ben Quiller broke?’ he asked excitedly. ‘We heard about the fight after we left you. You were going to use a knife on him, weren’t you?’

‘That’s an exaggerated tale,’ Plowart said. ‘He tried to pick a fight by smashing my radio and I picked up a knife to defend myself.’

‘Ben is convinced you’re a maniac. He maintains that anyone who uses a knife over a trivial thing like a wireless should be certified or killed. When we told him about your flinging rocks down on us, he said you wouldn’t be satisfied until there had been a few deaths here.’

‘What do you expect him to say?’ Plowart asked. ‘I made a coward of him in front of his friends, so now he must paint me as a dangerous fellow to justify himself. When you’re older you’ll come across the same stupidity, time and again. As for the radio, it may be a small thing to a fisherman, but for me it’s a matter of life and death. And while we’re on the subject, who repairs radios on Vachau?’

Jonathan shook his head doubtfully. ‘You might get it done by Old Stoller at the general goods shop; he’s the only one

who handles out-of-the-way jobs. Though I must say, I've never heard of him repairing a wireless.'

'Since we're friends again,' Plowart said, 'you lead the way. And after Old Stolle will you take me on to the Seignior?''

'Come along, then,' Jonathan said briskly. 'His shop is only two minutes from here.' After they had gone a few yards, he said animatedly: 'I say! You *are* a deadly shot! You almost made us break our necks when you started pelting those stones down on us. We admired you tremendously for it: it was such a dirty trick! But when the enemy's on the retreat, he can't counter-attack—wasn't that your strategy?' Jonathan gathered enthusiasm, flourishing his arms as he walked. 'Those ricochet shots of yours were marvellous! When we come back at the end of term we plan to spring the same thing on some unsuspecting visitors. Of course, we shan't go berserk as you did: we'll make them fall just a little way . . .'

He kept up his inconsequential chatter for the rest of the way with Plowart occasionally contributing monosyllabic replies, his attention elsewhere. Eventually they came to the cross-roads at the top of the hill that descended to the harbour. Just past the cross-roads, three or four low-roofed shops were grouped together.

'Here's Old Stolle!' Jonathan said, opening the glass door of the first shop they came to.

But confronted with the radio, Old Stolle proved useless. He was a withered old man with a brown, flaccid face, a gigantic wart on his forehead and an air of secretiveness. When Plowart disclosed the nature of his visit and produced the radio, Old Stolle's face took on a frightened expression. He had evidently heard Quiller's story and was fearful something similar might befall him. 'No, Sur. Never handle the things,' he whispered. 'I couldn't mend one to save my life.' Even as he said this he stiffened, aware that this sentiment was a trifle unfortunate under the circumstances.

Plowart said impatiently: 'Then can't you have it sent to Guernsey for repair?'

'It would take a week to come back, Sur.'

'A week! That's no good. I must have it by tomorrow.' Seeing it was a waste of time discussing it any further, he stalked out of the shop without another word, banging the door behind him. Guided by Jonathan he set off along a path leading to the left. It was a part of the island he had not yet explored. Glancing back at him, Jonathan asked curiously: 'Why are you so desperate to get your wireless back tomorrow?'

'It keeps me company. I'm impatient, not desperate.'

The way was pleasant as it dipped down to the sea. As they walked Plowart could hear the sound of the water stirring with the subdued, continuous seething of insects building. The sound communicated a sense of urgency that hastened his steps until the boy was puffing in his efforts to keep up. 'Do slow down!' Jonathan said plaintively. 'There's no need to run.'

He slowed obediently. 'How far to go?'

'Only a quarter of a mile.' Presently, Jonathan said gleefully: 'Did you notice? Poor Old Stollert was terrified of you!'

'An incompetent fool! If he ran that penny business of his in London he'd soon be bankrupt, I can tell you.' They were passing a hedgerow at this moment and Plowart yielded to an impulse and flung the radio over it and into the field behind. 'It's no good for its purpose now,' he said grimly.

For once Jonathan was diplomatic. After a quick look at his companion's face he asked no further questions. Another few hundred yards brought them to a pair of massive gates of ornate ironwork with a pair of tridents crossing at the top. The gates were some fifteen feet high, suspended on colonnades of portland stone resting against high walls that vanished among the densely planted trees to either side. These walls encircled the estate, he supposed. When he pushed open the gates the tridents uncrossed at the top. Jonathan remained outside as he went through.

'I won't go with you, if you don't mind,' he said. 'Claremont wants to talk to you alone. She expected you to call.'

Plowart shrugged and started down the long drive toward the house showing through the trees. The thick branches with their green cargoes of leaves obstructed his view and it was not until he was clear of them that he saw the house in its entirety.

There could not have been a more complete contrast to the house on the other side of the island. He saw a long red-bricked façade broken by some thirty large windows on two levels, all glittering and gaily curtained. The trees ended in an almost straight line before an immaculately mown lawn that spread a green crescent around the front of the building. To the left of the lawn a pergola, heavy with tresses of crimson roses, introduced a trellised rose garden. Running at a right-angle from the Seignior's was a precisely clipped yew hedge with a small wicket in the centre of it. Everything about the scene was so orderly and planned that Plowart knew without needing to investigate, that this hedge concealed a walled vegetable garden convenient to the kitchen door.

The entrance to the house was under a large portico, surmounted by carved woodwork rising in scrolls to a peak. He knocked at the door and heard the sound travel hollowly inside. Almost instantly, footsteps approached and the door opened on a grave-faced girl dressed in a faded gingham frock. With slanting blue eyes and a small nose and mouth, she was as dark as a Celt. For a girl she was quite tall, only a few inches smaller than himself, and the thin frock outlined shoulders and breasts that were high and confident. She was about twenty-four, as Lumas had said.

Her grave expression relaxed into a slight smile when she recognised her visitor. 'You see how easy it is to find me?' she said. 'There was no need to resort to bribery.'

'So you're Claremont?' He looked at her curiously but apart from an unmistakable air of gentleness and compassion, he saw nothing in her face to indicate her exceptional powers. 'My name is Peter Plowart. May I talk to you for a few minutes? It's of the utmost importance to me.'

She considered for a moment, then smiled again and opened the door wide. 'An irresistible appeal, Mr Plowart. Won't you come in?'

Claremont led him into a room directly adjacent to the hall. It was a clean, refreshing chamber containing a minimum of furniture separated by large areas of polished flooring. The cleanliness was emphasised by white-washed walls, interrupted here and there by oil paintings. The pictures were all of religious subjects: Christ, the Madonna, the Apostles and a few of the more popular saints. He noticed that all of the saints were women; among them he recognised St. Ursula, St. Teresa and St. Joan. Fully a dozen vases, containing a medley of flowers, filled the air with a moist fragrance.

Claremont gestured Plowart to a deep armchair, then settled herself on a sofa a few feet away. She stopped him from speaking with a raised hand. 'No,' she said. 'Before you say a word, I have to offer you an apology. My brothers passed on to you what I saw in your temperament, which was cruel and unthinking of them. My only excuse is that I intended my remarks for private conversation and certainly not to embarrass you. If we are to be friends you must forget every word they told you.' She paused, regarding him speculatively, then said: 'And from all I've heard you, have great need of friends, Mr Plowart.'

Plowart, who had followed these preliminary words first with surprise and then with impatience, exclaimed: 'I've no intention of forgetting them. In fact, the reason I've come here is to confirm the accuracy of what you said. You are the first person to have understood me, and I'm still astounded by your performance.'

Claremont shook her head firmly. 'You aren't here to congratulate or flatter me, I think. Do you want me to help you in some way?'

Plowart nodded vigorously. 'Yes, I do. As soon as I heard what you said about me I had to come and see you for myself. Forgive me for not wasting words but my problem is too

urgent for formalities. I'm suffering from self-division, as you've seen, but now can I appeal to you? Since you've diagnosed the disease, can you prescribe for it? How can I unite myself—can you tell me that?'

Claremont stared at him disbelievingly, then seeing he was serious she threw her head back and laughed unrestrainedly for some minutes, while he watched her without any change of expression. When she finally stopped laughing, she wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, saying: 'I'm sorry, but really! . . . You ask the most preposterous questions! If you thought about the matter you would realise that every great spiritual man has spent his whole life trying to solve the same problem. There's no overnight cure, you know. You should read St. Augustine, then your conflict won't seem half so serious.'

'I'm not interested in your St. Augustines!' Plowart retorted angrily. 'Sanctimonious wrestling with rhetoric may send one's name through posterity but it doesn't improve the condition of the world a scrap! But you people who talk in terms of souls don't really like realities, do you?'

When she did not reply, he stood up and walked over to the window. Across the lawn the trees were swaying slightly at their tops, the highest leaves catching the first of the evening wind. Occasionally a bird detached itself from a hazardous perch and plummeted in a streak of black to the lower branch of a different tree. There was probably only another hour's light left and then it would be night. He swung around and found her watching him reflectively.

Plowart smiled at her and sank his hands into his trouser pockets. 'Unlike you, I can't afford to waste time discussing souls and spiritual men: and don't think I'm any the poorer for it! Do you imagine that the writhings and moanings of your Augustines entitle them to homage? Not from me! That kind of holiness stinks more sulphurously than the worst sin. It's more than an abdication from the world and its sufferings—it's a complete refusal to recognise the existence of other

life outside one's own flesh. If you're going to ask me to compare myself to that kind of man, why, I'd just as soon throw myself on the refuse heap!'

'You might be all the better for a little writhing and moaning yourself, Mr Plowart,' she said disdainfully. 'And if you're so superior even a saint pales beside you, then why do you come to me for your answers? Can't you supply your own?'

'Do you want me to tell you?' He leaned against the mantelpiece, looking down at her. 'Briefly, because I'm the greatest man of our time. That's the cause of the trouble. Greatness consists of a delicate counterpoise between—no, not goodness and evil!—but sanity and madness. The slightest pressure either way upsets it. If I tell you that I'm being persecuted by jesuitical nightmares that argue the worthlessness of humanity and the futility of all effort, you might think it childish. But you'd be wrong! To an ordinary man that would be a bagatelle, not a nightmare; he's already convinced he's worthless and effort is futile. But to someone like me, desperately trying to make man a few inches more than he is, arguments like that are the equivalent of leprosy. An outrage against all hope!

'That's why I came! Since you had the perception to see deeper than the others, I hoped you might have a cure for me. Instead, you compare me to a 1,600-year-old corpse and hope I'll be gratified. Well, if you've no remedies, save your sermons. You can't fill an abyss with confetti!'

Claremont said softly: 'So you imagine you are the greatest man alive?' Then, shaking her head, she said: 'I hope not, Plowart. For all our sakes, I hope not.'

He shrugged indifferently and moved to the door. 'I shan't waste any more of your time,' he said. 'You are right; I'm a fool to look to anyone for help. This problem is my own.'

She followed him out into the hall and impulsively put her hand on his arm as he opened the front door. 'You still need friends, Plowart,' she said. 'And I'm willing to be one while you're on this island.'

'I don't think I particularly need an arm around my

shoulders,' he said ironically. 'My requirements are different.'

'There are other aspects to friendship . . .'

He looked at her with new interest. 'What aspects, precisely?'

'You told my brothers you needed a mentor,' she reminded him in a low voice.

'So I did. And what could you teach me? There's only one problem I want to solve, as you know.'

Claremont lifted her head and looked him directly in the eyes. 'The way to unity, perhaps,' she said clearly.

The effect of her words was immediate. He grasped her shoulders and bent his face to hers in a swift movement. 'I thought you knew it!' he said exultantly.

She shook her head slowly. 'I'm not sure you should be told. Until I am sure, I shan't tell you.'

'So that's how it is! You'll keep it hanging over my head until I leave your blessed Vachau. Every time I'm naughty it will retreat a little further from me!' He smiled twistedly and released his grasp on her. 'I don't play that sort of game, and I never could.'

'Neither do I. You are perfectly free to do anything you wish, whether it offends me or not. Nothing of that sort will affect my judgment.'

He looked at her searchingly, then smiled. 'Yes, I think that's really true. You've more strength than I believed a girl could have.' He laughed suddenly at a thought that occurred to him. 'Do you realise that this self-division is the only obstacle to my future? When I've solved it everything else will be easy! So you hold the success of our civilisation in your hands, Claremont.'

'Perhaps,' she said, as he left her with a wave. She went back into the room where they had talked and, standing at the window, watched him walk down the drive. He carried his head erect and his body rigid from the waist up, not looking to either side as he walked.

He found the Siren just past the cross-road; an isolated, two-storied building with a wide balcony running along its front, lit by lanterns. The tavern was painted a flesh-pink. A signboard swinging from a wooden arm at the corner of the roof showed a golden-haired girl rising from the foam with her shoulders and breasts bare, and only the curling gold letters of the tavern denied it was Venus.

The place was entered by way of the balcony; and when Plowart crossed it and pulled open the door, he stepped into a low-ceilinged drinking-room heavy with tobacco smoke, noisy with talk and crowded with islanders. A distinct hush fell over the room when he appeared and the various groups of drinkers turned to look at him with blank hostility.

Plowart stood where he was at the door and looked around the room slowly, recognising many of the faces that had met him when he stepped ashore the previous day. Over to one side he caught sight of the three men he had encountered on Guernsey, with the man who had broken his radio standing in the middle. This would be Ben Quiller, then.

On seeing who the arrival was, Quiller's face became a study of fear and antagonism. Plowart smiled, observing that fear held the predominant place.

The unnatural social paralysis was broken by Plowart. Paying no attention to the prolonged silence, he strolled over to the bar and ordered a hot rum and two large ham sandwiches. When the rum and sandwiches arrived he took a stool at the bar and turned his back on the hostility, eating and drinking methodically because he had not eaten all day. The food was sufficient to fill him and the rum served its purpose in driving the chill from his stomach. He pushed back the glass and signalled for a second rum, looking over his shoulder casually as he did so. The room had practically emptied. The only islanders left were a few old men sleeping fitfully in odd corners.

He said to the innkeeper: 'A noisy place you've got here.'

The irony escaped the man. Towelling a glass, he looked

up to say tersely: 'You should have seen it last night! Quiller and his pals knocked Buffonet about and accused him of stealing five pounds from them.'

'What happened?'

'They got back most of it. He'd already spent about five shillings on drink before they caught him. They got their money's worth by knocking a couple of his teeth loose.'

'Was he much hurt otherwise?'

'I don't know about that, but he looked a horrible mess when they carted him off home.' He picked up another glass and said conversationally: 'It happened about ten o'clock, not long before closing. They claimed he'd acted the blackleg to some maniac they wanted to keep off Vachau.'

'That's me,' Plowart said, sipping his rum.

'I know, Sir,' the man said. 'I thought you'd better know what they're calling you.'

'Buffonet made the mistake of helping me with my luggage. I hope they don't take reprisals against you, too. After all, you've made the mistake of serving me.'

'Don't worry about me,' the man said grimly. 'If they want to start that little game they'll have to sail to Guernsey for their liquor. I don't mind.'

'They won't like that. Have you got an envelope?'

'Here you are, Sir.'

He watched curiously as Plowart took five banknotes from his wallet and slipped them into the envelope. Next, he ripped a page from his diary and, taking out his fountain pen, scribbled across it: 'Imitate the Phoenix!' This cryptic injunction went in with the banknotes. He sealed the envelope and wrote Buffonet's name across the front, then handed it across the bar. 'Give it to him when he comes in next,' he told the man.

'You shouldn't be so generous, Sir,' the innkeeper said disapprovingly. 'He's too stupid to appreciate it.'

'It's not generosity. I'm protecting my own kind.'

The man resignedly slid the envelope with Buffonet's name

on it behind a squat bottle of *crème de menthe* on one of his display shelves above the money drawer. 'I know better uses for money,' he said gloomily.

'Then I'll remember your goodwill handsomely when I go back to England. Have you a radio?'

Galvanised by this promise, the innkeeper became all geniality. 'Here we are, Sir! D'you want to hear some music? We can get Berlin, Paris, Moscow or New York on this. It's a little French job.'

'What about London?'

'Now that's child's play! Wait a moment, you can time me! I'll get it inside two minutes.' In a burst of enthusiasm he started to fiddle with the dials of the radio under the counter, but Plowart stopped him.

'Not tonight. I want to keep in touch with what's happening on the morning news. If I walk over about 8 a.m., will you leave the door open for me and have the radio switched on? You'll profit by the arrangement at the end of the month, of course.'

When the innkeeper nodded agreement Plowart gave him a pound note and said: 'Wrap up another ham sandwich and keep the change.' He left with the sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper under his arm.

He walked back to the house sunk in meditation. Although it was now dark, he already knew the way well enough to be able to think of other things. The lighted french windows guided him through the garden, and when he opened them he found Lumas still sitting in almost the same position as when he had left him several hours earlier. The cripple was watching the lamp with the dreamy, fatuous smile of semi-intoxication. Two empty wine bottles stood on the table in front of him, and a third bottle was half empty. The room was rank with paraffin fumes and stale air, which was all the more offensive to Plowart coming in as he did from the clean air outside.

Plowart looked at him for a moment with disgust then

turned and slammed the french windows shut. The noise roused Lumas from his drunken reverie and he jerked himself into an attentive posture and fixed his eyes on his guest. 'Ish Mishtar Plowart! Yesh, that's who it ish! The great dictator himself! Good evenin' to you.'

Plowart nodded a brusque greeting, intending to go straight to his room, but the cripple raised an admonishing hand when he made for the door.

'Jush uh moment! What'ure yuh carrying under yuh arm, Mishtah Plowart?'

'Food.'

The cripple nodded a slow comprehension, then pointed imperatively to the seat next to him. 'If yuh won't take my food, take one of my seats. Least you can do ! Be civil, now; that's about all I want from you.'

Plowart hesitated, then sat down impatiently. 'What do you want?'

'Want?' The cripple twisted his head around to face him. 'Want to talk! Want to convey my innermost thoughts to you.' He said it clearly and Plowart noticed with disgust that the drunken slur had disappeared completely. It had been another effect to capture sympathy; he knew the mentality.

'How long will it take? I want to go to bed.'

'Innermost thoughts tell me I've failed as a man! Made a mistake in splitting myself, to tell you the truth. Went on great spiritual adventures with one half and neglected the other. Wife sees only the visible half, of course. Definitely neglected, that! She reduced me to an ill-mannered, drunken monster . . .' He chuckled reminiscently. 'You know the sort of treatment? Pained silences . . . irritated gestures . . . grieved expressions? I saw myself as noble and she saw me as something quite different. Her view was more insistent so it prevailed. So I became a pig. And I wasn't really, all the time. Isn't that funny?' He started laughing, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

'You've told me this before,' Plowart said.

'It's not a pleasant thing to have a hole torn in your belly and find your entrails gone one morning, is it, now? I appeal to you as an honest man,' Plowart! Am I being too harsh?' His eyes flickered on Plowart for a second, then returned to the lamp. Not waiting for a reply, he went on dreamily: 'Yes, she's taken my entrails. But I'm still a man!' With sudden anger he hit the table with his fist and glared at Plowart as though he was to blame. 'So far as she's concerned I'm just an impotent old cripple without the right to breathe. Can you understand that? But I'm not so impotent, after all! Not now that I've decided to get her back, even if I have to kill him!'

'What were you quarrelling about when I left?'

'Oh, that? My wife objected to you having the attic. She wanted me to turn you out.'

'You needn't bother; I'm looking for another place to stay tomorrow.'

'No, you mustn't think of it! You're deserting me and it will ruin everything,' Lumas said with sudden agitation.

'Who lives up there? I wondered what was in the wind when I found the water fresh and the sheets newly laundered. It was suspiciously out of character with your house, Lumas.'

'It's her lover's room! The Bullock's!' He nodded fiercely. 'Ever since he became her lover he's hidden himself up there, where he knows I can't climb. I've let it go on for years, afraid to complain in case she left me . . . but now I've changed! If you stay in that attic there's no other room I can't reach.'

'So all your nonsense about wanting a celebrity in the house was nothing more than a subterfuge to stop up a rat's hole!' Plowart suddenly saw the humour of it and laughed dryly. 'All right, you wily old devil . . . I'll stay!'

'That's right! Stay for ever if you like.' The cripple burst into laughter that had a chilling wildness to it. 'Nobody could be worse than him.'

'I'm going to bed,' Plowart said.

'A waste of time! I'm going to drink all night and be a

dirty drunk. And while I'm drinking I'll wait for the Bullock to stick his nose against the windows to see if I'm still awake. He's in for a double shock. He'll think Lumas is the same old cripple to be hoodwinked by anyone, not knowing the new Lumas has a mallet for him. And if he gets past me he'll find a stranger in his bed.' This was enough to send the cripple into peals of drunken mirth, and, repelled by the spectacle, Plowart left the room.

He climbed the stairs without a light and, on the landing, almost collided with Anne Lumas, who drew back just in time. She was standing against the wall, presumably listening intently to as much as could be heard of the conversation downstairs. She grasped his arm tightly and murmured: 'Is he all right?'

He said roughly: 'You're shivering! Come up to my room out of this draught. There's no point in waiting in the cold. As for your husband, he's drunk himself almost insensible. I can't see either of you living long unless you change your conjugal habits.' He followed the soft sound of her breathing up to his room, noticing she swung herself up the ladder with the ease of long practice.

As soon as he had lowered the trapdoor he felt his way across to the bed and lit the candle stump. While it was still flickering he pulled forward the armchair and nodded for her to sit. When she was comfortable he went over to the wash bowl and poured a glass of water for himself. He drank deeply, then looked across at her and said: 'Haven't you got a request to make?'

'A request?' She was a good actress; her face gave away nothing

'Yes,' he said. 'Aren't you going to ask me to move to another room? Perhaps a room that you have already prepared for me and which is superior in a dozen different ways to this one? Aren't you going to ask me to move there and not say a word to your husband so he will think I'm still here? After all, with those legs of his he'd never find out that I was

somewhere else, would he? He'd just have to trust to luck.'

'You're very shrewd, Mr Plowart,' she said. 'It's true I meant to ask you to change rooms earlier this evening. It's also true that I've prepared another room for you. But your tone has warned me against asking, so I shan't humiliate myself.'

'Good. Well, we've established that.' He took another gulp of water and put the empty glass back on the stand. 'I hope your friend won't be too inconvenienced?'

She said unemotionally: 'He's a violent, obstinate man when he's balked. I shall use all my influence to persuade him to go back to Guernsey until you are gone.'

'I should do that. It would be very stupid to have a brawl over an attic room.'

'If you knew what happiness this room has seen, you wouldn't despise it.'

'You're wrong. Happiness to me is what foot rot is to an athlete.' He looked at her curiously. 'Are you referring to your own happiness, incidentally?'

'I know nothing of anybody else's,' she retorted.

Plowart smiled. 'I suppose the fact that your love nest is situated in your husband's house makes it that little more piquant?'

She visibly recoiled from him. He surveyed her with a contemptuous smile on his lips, not in the least perturbed by her reaction. She whispered: 'That isn't true. It's a monistrous suggestion!'

'Then, what is the truth, Mrs Lumas?'

'You think it's lechery, sensuality and pleasure-chasing! How wrong you are! Yes, it was lecherous, sensual and pleasurable to begin with. What in God's name is mating if not that! But now I'm a woman perpetually in torment. Miserable when I'm with my husband because I compare the intensity of feeling elsewhere, and miserable with my lover because I know the aching emptiness of my husband. Try travelling from ecstasy to extinguishment within twenty-four

hours, Mr Plowart, and see how your bones stand up to it! You couldn't have chosen a more inadequate word to describe it than "piquant".'

'Then I'm sorry to have offended you,' Plowart said indifferently.

Seeing he was by no means a friend, she stood up and walked over to the trapdoor. With one foot on the first step she looked back at him. 'Tell me one thing, Mr Plowart. Did you have to denude the room of all the things I love?'

'Yes. They were all irrelevant.'

She nodded. 'My husband couldn't have found a better night-watchman to look after his interests. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

He listened to her going down the steps, then walk along the corridor beneath. He wondered idly where she had put the paintings and the carpets. In safe storage somewhere, probably. As soon as he was gone, back they'd come as if he hadn't happened.

The jettisoned paintings jogged his memory and he went over to his empty suitcase and unlocked it. Inside a flap, buttoned on the underside of its lid, was a collection of photographs and drawings, which he now drew out and placed on the bed. They were of notable leaders over the centuries. There was no chronological order to the gallery which he pinned in a long unbroken line above his bed. He put Napoleon between Attila and Genghis Khan, Hannibal between Bismarck and Marlborough, and the more contemporary world-shakers in whatever order they came to hand. There were sixteen faces that had changed history: men who had changed the course of nations to reflect their own personalities.

When the gallery was complete, his eyes moved from one face to another, resting here upon the podgy face of one world conqueror and there upon the thin, foxy face of another. He had marshalled them together when he was nineteen and a student of economics. Ricardo and Keynes could not compete with such company!

He had fallen into the habit of staring into each pair of eyes and trying to read in them the secret that had taken these men to pinnacles of power. They all had the same ruthlessness, side by side with a magnificently disciplined imagination. To conquer an age one had to cultivate both qualities: one without the other spelled certain destruction, as all history showed.

He walked over to the armchair and threw himself down in it. There had been people he could remember who had talked to him earnestly of broadening the mind, imbibing culture, developing aesthetic sense and travelling the world to know one's importance. He remembered, too, the days when he had been jeered at by the other students of the London School of Economics as an ignoramus. But what were they all now, with their undisciplined imaginations and idiotic sentimentalism? Dilettantes, without exception. Failures who had used their spreadeagled minds to formulate honourable explanations of their mediocrity. He was the only one who had gone on remorselessly to his objective.

But the margin was so thin and the distinction so subtle between victory and defeat that it caused him to close his eyes for a moment in the candlelight, at the narrowness of his own triumph.

Yes, it was a divine stupidity that raised men head and shoulders above the rest. That, and vitality. Stupidity, that is, in other people's vocabularies, but not in his own . . . The other students had all made the mistake of loving outside themselves; had fallen prey to absurd philosophies like humanism, to social systems like democracy, to ludicrous virtues like compassion. They were all Lumases in embryo. The universities of every country were pouring them out in stereotyped thousands. But in their forties they became drunks, homosexuals, drug addicts, sex maniacs or aimless drifters, harnessed to the anonymity of security!

He was not among them because they had isolated him. What should have finished him had positively become the springboard to fanaticism. What greater justification was there

to become united and self-complete than when one was ostracized? Did it happen, he wondered, to Stalin in Georgia, to Churchill at Harrow or Hitler at Linz? Everything he knew told him that it had. Yes, they would all claim that they had been far from outcasts, but when the facts were established and the biographies circulated, would their claims be verified? Certainly, Churchill, Hitler and Stalin had all been regarded as nincompoops at their respective schools. There was the start of the furnace glow!

Plowart undressed slowly and went to bed. When he blew out the candle the faces of the men who had changed the world began to move slowly past him in crocodile file, like an orderly procession of schoolboys giving their salutes at roll-call. 'Hitler!' . . . 'Attila!' . . . 'Charlemagne!' . . . 'Alexander!' 'Genghis Khan!' . . . 'Cæsar!' . . . 'Lenin!' . . .

He fell asleep smiling.

Five

Forebodings haunted his sleep, waking him several times with rushing sensations of panic. Each time he opened his eyes it was to find the sheets wet with perspiration and the blankets twisted and tangled around him as evidence that he had struggled vigorously while he was unconscious. The first time he awoke he felt such a frightening sense of unreality he licked the palm of his right hand, tasting the salt, before he was sure he was awake. A few hours later he had to get up and miserably re-make the bed. At this point he would normally have given up the idea of rest and spent the night reading and writing, but knowing sleep was the only cure for his impatience for the new day, he stubbornly persisted—and succeeded.

He was sleeping when the dawn came, but two hours later he was moving about the attic with the energy and promptitude of a man with a desperate appointment in the offing. When he had washed, shaved and dressed, it was twenty minutes to eight, and he opened the trapdoor and descended through the house with the sense that he was the only one alive in it. The drawing-room, where Lumas had spent the night drinking, was in utter disorder. A number of smashed wine glasses had been brushed into a small tidy pile on the table. Next to these remains was a quartet of empty bottles standing in a cluster with their corks set in a little line like parading soldiers. Between the bottles, corks, smashed glasses and the paraffin lamp, small puddles of wine lay everywhere, seeping into the grain of the table. Two of the chairs had been overturned, and newspapers and garments had been tossed all over the floor. Among the jumble he recognised several articles of clothing that his host had worn the night before, including his trousers, jacket

and waistcoat. He glanced around at this aftermath of despair, then picking up one of the bottles put his nose to the top. The smell was rank and acid, like exhaustion in the mouth, and he put the bottle down instantly and went on to the terrace.

There he came upon Lumas in a dilapidated woollen dressing gown, watching the sun rising. He was stretched out in a deckchair taking deep rhythmical breaths with his mouth open. His face was blotchy, but otherwise he seemed unaffected by his night's excesses; probably he was constitutionally used to them by now.

When Plowart came out he turned his head and exclaimed cheerfully, 'Good morning, good morning! If it isn't the keeper of the peace himself!'

'What do you mean by that?' Plowart inquired, halting reluctantly.

Lumas chuckled knowingly. 'Come, I know! Don't say you didn't warn our friend I was waiting up for him. I don't mind, I assure you; I know your warning was given out of consideration for me.'

'What are you talking about?' Plowart asked harshly. 'If you mean your wife's lover, I've never set eyes on the man. And why should I warn him when I don't care whether he comes or not!'

Lumas' face darkened. 'Then it's her, that's who it is,' he said. 'It had to be one or the other of you. There was no sign of him all night; that was enough to tell me someone had told him to keep away.'

'If you reasoned it out you'd find the right person first time,' Plowart told him coldly. 'But that apart, what makes you so sure that your man didn't break into the house another way? You spent the night drinking yourself stupid in the drawing-room, but there are three other sides to this house like any other. And if he did come in, your wife wouldn't scream for help, you can be sure!'

'Oh, I know, I know! But don't underestimate me. In my small way I'm a strategist, too, Plowart!' He looked up slyly

for a moment, then with an air of confiding a momentous secret, said: 'Why do you think you haven't been given a key to the front door? I'll tell you, because it was bricked in two months ago, that's why, just like the back door! The only way in is the one you've just used; all the other windows are barred so tightly not even a monkey could squirm its way in!' He paused and studied Plowart's expression. The disbelief he saw there far from damping his volubility only encouraged it. . . .

'I looked at my problem in terms of marine engineering, Plowart. There, that surprises you! But what's the difference between a ship in storm and a house besieged, eh? When you build a ship you make certain that the part below the water line is divided in a system of inter-joining compartments with separate water-tight doors. If the hull is ever holed, one locks the doors to either side of the pierced compartment and the ship still floats. My plan is on the same principle. If our friend manages to break through the hull of my house—through one of the windows, let's say—he faces one locked door after another *inside* the house. The only doors unlocked are those belonging to my wife's bedroom, your room, the kitchen, and the drawing-room—which is my bedroom for the duration of his visit. This way brings him straight to me! So I can say confidently that he has not come visiting! How's that for ingenuity, Plowart?' He chuckled again.

'The cunning of a madman,' Plowart said bluntly. 'But the game's a lost one, Lumas. Why don't you let the woman go? Can't you see you're losing your mind?'

'You say that because you're jealous!' the cripple shouted furiously, his good humour evaporating instantly. 'You've never had anyone to love, that's the trouble with you!'

'No. It's no good reasoning with you,' Plowart said disgustedly. 'You're just a fool, Lumas, and I'm another to offer you advice!'

He left the cripple glaring after him and walked through the garden to the path along the cliffs.

The tavern was deserted when Plowart got to it, but the

landlord had not forgotten his promise and the door of the drinking-room was unlocked. The room was still unswept, with sawdust on the floor soaking up spilled beer and all the chairs and benches upturned on the tables. After a quick glance round to assure himself he was alone, he leaned over the counter and tuned the radio to London.

While he was waiting for the set to warm, he walked across to the first table and took down one of the chairs. He was five minutes early and had to listen to a short prayer delivered by a priest from Edinburgh. It was not inspiring and he listened absently, giving most of his attention to the sunlight lengthening its wedges along the sawdust floor.

The main news items that followed were mainly concerned with the Middle East, giving accounts from various Arab capitals of the deterioration of British influence in the Hashemite countries. The announcer went on to deal with military activities in the closing phases of the Communist and Mau Mau insurrections in Malaya and Kenya. The foreign news closed with statistics demonstrating the increased industrial production of Western Germany over the past year and a brief description of the launching of a new liner at Belfast.

The domestic section offered Plowart nothing of interest until the last item was reached. Like all the preceding items, the announcer read it in a flat monotone.

* * *

'Sir Gregory Bourcey, fourth baronet of Petchoney, Cornwall, has been found battered to death by an unknown assailant. C.I.D. officers from New Scotland Yard, investigating the crime, have stated that the murder took place at Sir Gregory's home in Hampstead, London, during the early hours of this morning. A bloodstained hatchet was found near the body.

'Sir Gregory has been active in politics for the last five years and was a founder member of the New Britain League. The League's first parliamentary candidate, Mr Peter Plowart, is contesting the Whitechapel by-election next month.

'The weather over Southern England today will be . . .'

* * *

He walked across to the radio and switched it off with a quick turn of the wrist. The wedges of gold had merged into one another now, and the whole floor was sunlit. In a back room he could hear the faint voices of a man and woman in animated conversation with occasional outbursts of laughter and he decided to leave before he was involved in their inanities.

He walked away from the Siren with his head bent in thought. This was the end of big, fat Bourcey, then! The red-cheeked obstreperous fool who had impeded him so consistently was gone at last. Because he had been useful at the beginning he had foolishly imagined that there could be co-equal stars, he with his bluff, plotting stupidities, his public school accent and aristocratic connections, and Plowart with his driving, pale-faced fanaticism. When they had started five years ago Bourcey had been indispensable; two years later his uses had become definitely limited . . . and from then on he was an intolerable menace jockeying for power.

As the League increased in influence there had never been any doubt which way Bourcey would jump. Despite all his precious promises of eternal friendship, loyalty and what have you, caste would have asserted itself in the selection of his own kind for prospective League Parliamentarians. The existing joint leadership would have been replaced by a cabal and Plowart, finding himself isolated, would have been forced to fall in with the ideas of the majority or get out.

Well, he had allowed for all that from the beginning. Then, the dangers had been distant and the benefits immediate. Bourcey's ability to smooth a revolutionary doctrine into a democratic shape, his genius for persuasion and his powers of conciliation had all been immense assets. But now that the building stood ready for its master, the architect had become superfluous.

The lessons of history showed clearly that a supreme leader cannot rise without the aid of a popular movement. In turn, a

popular movement could only be brought into being by a versatile, accessible organiser with flexible views, pacifying here, inciting there, recruiting everywhere. This was where the arch-schemer triumphed over the single-minded blindness of a great man, where a Machiavelli transcended a Cromwell. But if this genius of compromise were not forcibly removed when his task was done, the movement, instead of producing a supreme leader, would merely throw up a galaxy of conflicting minor chiefs, between them dissipating the energy, vision and determination that had animated its birth. Posterity would understand his motives, but contemporaries were blinder than historians of succeeding ages; many of them would be only too glad to use the slimy, emotional word of murder if it meant stopping a brighter star than themselves! Then he must go prepared!

There was no doubt that the last sentence of the news bulletin had been incriminating. The conjunction of his name with Bourcey's was something nobody could have anticipated. Why bring his name into the affair at all? It would have been sufficient to state that the League was sending its first candidate to the polls within a month without offering a name. Was there some motive? Nothing could be more unlikely; it was just an unfortunate coincidence. The fact that he was two hundred miles away, on holiday before undertaking the rigours of the final campaigning, was sufficient to answer any official suspicions. The unfortunate part of the coupling was that it would not be long before the islanders learned of it over the radio and through the newspapers brought over from Guernsey. Quiller and his friends would be only too willing to tell the police a melodramatic yarn of how he had drawn a knife when his radio was smashed. Then there was Old Stollert, eager to relate every syllable of what Plowart had said about having his radio ready for today because tomorrow would be too late, and, of course, Jonathan who would jump at the opportunity of making his *début* as a *raconteur* with a description of how Plowart had flung his radio away in a rage, and

how he had nearly killed both brothers with a maniacal barrage of stones. The landlord of the Siren would be able to supply the final part to the tale of the radio and in the hands of an able prosecutor what a tale it could be! Finally, there was Lumas, with his so-called great insights into Plowart's career; he would provide some very interesting testimonies to his violent nature if he were interrogated by someone quiet and patient with the persistence to listen through all the details of his marital troubles. Yes, he could tick off the possibilities on Vachau as coldly as the police themselves! And all could so easily have been guarded against had he known some officious nincompoop at Broadcasting House was going to join his name to the dead man's.

But he wasn't done yet; no, not by any means! When it came down to bedrock questioning the radio evidence could be scotched airily with:

* * *

'But all politicians follow the news broadcasts, Inspector. They are our bread and butter. If anything was causing me concern on Vachau it was the Middle East situation. This Hashemite business is the plainest piece of Foreign Office bungling imaginable. The aftermath of Colonel Lawrence's dilettantism in recommending us to the wrong dynasty, of course. We should have taken Philby's advice and supported The Leopard of Saudi Arabia and his Ikwan. As it was, our troubles began when they bundled out the Sherif of Mecca! Forgive me going on in this fashion, but, as you see, that was my interest. Naturally I was horrified by poor Bourcey's death. He was a wonderful comrade and companion and his death seriously damages the New Britain League. But as for wanting to kill him, it would be madness, Inspector. Who kills an ally on the eve of battle, Inspector? Let me ask you that.'

* * *

That was convincing enough! But why the devil had there been no mention of burglary when he had given instructions that Bourcey's wallet should be lifted, beside one or two

obvious valuables? The bulletin had inferred that it was plain unvarnished murder. And if robbery was not what brought the hatchet down in that darkened room in Hampstead, what *was* the motive? A hatchet was forgivable only as the weapon of a frightened, desperate man, surprised by a householder in the middle of his theft. As an instrument of deliberate murder it was a symbol of inhuman brutality. The ice pick driven into Trotsky's head in Mexico had swung more sympathisers from Communism than any opponent warranted. The weapon had horrified the imagination of the world and through the panic-stricken fear of weak men the hatchet might do the same.

But Trotsky and Bourcey were men of very different calibre. Trotsky was a man already invested by power, while Bourcey had stood on the threshold of power. The door had been slammed in his face before too many people had had time to see nobility and consequence in his features.

Well, nobility or not, the red face was done with for ever! The wide room with its ornate hangings and, beside the bed, the walnut writing bureau, its compartments filled with blue notepaper carrying the embossed crest at the top, reproduced itself in his mind. He could see Bourcey sitting up in bed, his face sharp and inquisitive, an ivory silk scarf around his throat to protect him from draughts, confessing himself 'utterly defeated' by the reasons for Plowart's eagerness to go on holiday just now. He was saying—what was he saying at their leave-taking?

'Of course you know best, my dear Plowart. Very well, rest up, look at the seagulls, listen to the wind crying around your lonely island. But remember the important thing . . . a month from now we have an appointment in Whitechapel. An historic appointment! Which means don't get yourself killed or something equally ridiculous!'

But it was Bourcey who had got killed by staying at home! And here he was, safe for years to come because he had taken the precaution of catching a boat for Vachau. When he got back to work the League would have its head again. A

powerful body has only one head; the democratic hydra was totally unrealistic in times of crisis. It was Bourcey's tragedy that he had thought otherwise!

But his death was going to arouse a lot of awkward questions if the police dismissed the burglary motive. The essential fact was that he should not show any inconsistencies in his behaviour, for that was the first point an investigator sought to establish in cases of murder.

* * *

'Tell me, did he change in any way from the date in question? Was he nervous, perhaps? . . . a little agitated or distressed for no accountable reason? In no way distraught? Would you please search your memory. Did he utter any exclamations which seemed in any way enigmatic to your mind? Leave any sentences half-finished? Your evidence on this matter is vital to the Crown!'

* * *

No, he would not change!

Immersed in these thoughts, he had taken the opposite way to the one he had intended, and he found himself walking in the direction of the Seigniory. On the incline leading down to it he could see occasional patches of grey slating through the intervening leafage. A few yards further on he picked out the estate wall, running beyond the trunks of the trees closest to the path, and every step brought the wall closer to the road in its curve to the Seigniory entrance. When he got to the great iron gates bearing the heraldic shield of the Capothy family, he paused irresolutely. The pause was only momentary and he pushed the gates and started along the drive. If he had to have company during these first hours following the announcement, it would be impossible to find a better person than Claremont Capothy. She was not likely to talk of anyone in damaging or hostile terms, and that was useful where there were so many others whose feelings for him were anything but friendly.

He saw her as soon as the house appeared at the end of the drive. Early as it was, she was preparing to play croquet on the

lawn with her two brothers. When Benjamin and Jonathan saw Plowart appear from under the trees they waved their mallets cheerfully but they did not accompany her when she came to meet him.

'You're all early risers, I see,' he greeted her.

'Good Heavens, don't judge us by today,' she laughed. 'We were all up at six. The boys go back to Harrow tomorrow and they're determined to make the most of the last day of freedom. Would you like to play croquet with us?'

'I'd rather talk to you alone.'

She gestured to the boys, occupying themselves with trial shots while they waited for her to return. 'Is that fair of us? You'll still be here when they are gone.' She studied his face for a moment then said abruptly: 'All right, let's go into the house. You go on and I'll explain to my brothers.'

He walked to the house hearing the subdued protests of the twins when Claremont withdrew from the game. She joined him at the porch and led him into the room where they had talked before. When they were seated, she said: 'There's something wrong, isn't there?'

Plowart said soberly: 'Because I wanted to speak to you alone? It doesn't necessarily follow. The fact is, I just wanted the pleasure of talking to you. You don't mind?'

'I should be very unfeminine if I did! But I'm not going to pretend I believe you.' She regarded him steadily, but discovering nothing from his expressionless face, she turned away saying: 'Perhaps I was wrong to think you needed friends. Until you've learned to confide in others, friendship is impossible.'

'On the other hand, you can't expect candour until there's trust,' Plowart countered. 'Knowing nothing about you, how can I trust you? For example, do you bear grievances against people?'

She understood he was changing the subject and smiled faintly. 'No. If one understands why something is done one invariably forgives it. I think grievances are a symptom of

blindness . . .' She looked at him shrewdly: 'What are yours, Plowart?'

That was too close. It was just the question a prosecutor would turn to should this conversation ever be scrutinised.

* * *

'And will you kindly tell this court how the accused replied to your question, Miss Capothy?'

* * *

'Not guilty!' Plowart said. 'People are too irrelevant for grievances. I've never met a person strong enough to love or hate and unless they can arouse one or the other in me they're worthless.'

But that was wrong as well. It opened the gates on another dangerous question.

* * *

'The accused worked side-by-side with Sir Gregory Bourcey for five years. As colleagues dedicated to the same goal, they worked sometimes seven days a week under conditions of the closest intimacy. When occasion demanded it, they sometimes worked all through the long hours of the night.

'We have heard witnesses say Sir Gregory regarded the accused as his closest friend; we have also heard witnesses say Plowart publicly paid the same tribute to Sir Gregory. But was this altogether the truth?

'In a conversation with Miss Capothy, on the same day he heard of his friend's violent death, Plowart asserted that he had never met a person strong enough to love or hate and he considered anyone between these extremes to be worthless. With this revealing statement we are left in no doubt that Sir Gregory was worthless in the eyes of the accused, despite his public protestation to the contrary.

'By his own confession, we have before us a man at once cold, inhuman and untruthful. It is the submission of the Crown that here we have the exact character of a man capable of murder.'

* * *

Plowart leaned towards her and said with vehemence:

‘Mind you, I won’t deny that I’ve loved and admired one or two extraordinary individuals.’

Claremont, in the act of lifting a small handbell from the table at her side, stopped and gazed at him with astonishment. ‘But that’s a complete contradiction of what you said before,’ she exclaimed. ‘You said . . .’

Plowart interrupted her fiercely: ‘Forget what I said! I retract it; isn’t that enough!’

‘Very well,’ she said thoughtfully. As he stared at her, she shook the bell and almost instantly an old man entered the room clad in a black gardening apron that covered him from neck to ankles. ‘Will you bring tea for this gentlemen and myself, Buffonet?’ She gave the old man a quick, girlish smile and added: ‘The good china, this time—and don’t argue with me!’

The man shook his head sadly and went out murmuring: ‘Ah, your poor father: the poor Seigneur!’

Hearing the name, Plowart was startled. Claremont mistook the reason and explained: ‘Buffonet has guarded that china set of ours for six years, ever since Father went to Athens. He wants to keep it to celebrate his return. But I’ve an idea he never will come back. Vachau was too small for him.’ Her voice was matter-of-fact and not in the least sad on the subject of her father’s truancy.

‘It was the name Buffonet that surprised me,’ Plowart said. ‘I met another man with the same name when I arrived. He’s considered a bit of a scoundrel, I gathered.’

Claremont laughed gaily and said: ‘There are seventy persons living on Vachau, and eleven of them are Buffonets. It’s common practice to inter-marry on an island, so the same names keep cropping up everywhere one goes. But the Buffonet you met is quite unique—he’s the disgrace of Vachau. When father dies Jonathan becomes the next Seigneur. If your Buffonet is still alive then, Jonathan says he is going to stick a stretch of canvas in his hands and push him out to sea when the wind’s blowing for Guernsey.’ For the first time he

noticed that she shared her brothers' disconcerting mixture of gravity and mischief. He supposed it was this that brought her so close to the twins.

At this point the servant returned with a tea-tray piled with china and a silver plate of minute iced cakes arranged in circles. 'He wouldn't like it, Miss Claremont,' the old man said censoriously, as he laid the tray on the table.

'Well, you tell him when he comes back,' she said smartly. He departed with an air of faint reproach, presumably back to the garden.

As she poured the tea, the girl caught her lower lip between her teeth and idly noticing this, he realised for the first time how exquisite she was. He was dumbfounded he had not noticed this on first meeting her. Involuntarily, his eyes passed from her face to her shoulders, then down to her breasts, and he was suddenly conscious of the flesh beneath her blue satin dress. Handing him a cup of tea, she looked up and he just had time to raise his own eyes before he was discovered. More to disguise his embarrassment than to make conversation, he said quickly: 'It seems strange that Jonathan will be the Seigneur. I thought Benjamin was the elder, and he's certainly the most responsible.'

'You're perfectly right,' she agreed. 'Compared with Benjamin, Jonathan is a fool. To be candid, he has an enormous number of defects and I shudder to think of him becoming the next Seigneur. But, to be just, he's not responsible for his greatest crime: I mean having twenty seconds more of life than Benjamin.' She offered him the cakes. 'Be greedy! Take two or three of them. They are my speciality and I'm furious when they are refused.'

He took a couple of the morsels on to his plate and elaborately tasted one. 'Delicious!' In normal circumstances it was the kind of titbit he abhorred; a titillation of jaded appetites. However, the dissolving on his tongue of the sweet, oven-browned crumbs cemented by butter, now produced in him a perverse pleasure, almost against his will.

Claremont was saying warmly: 'When rank depends on the succession of the elder son one automatically arrives at a weak hierarchy. Do you believe in primogeniture, Plowart?' Without waiting for his answer, she continued; 'Suppose a position becomes vacant and you are put forward purely on the ground of having waited the longest, should you have it?'

* * *

Under the shadow of St. Paul's Cathedral stretching down to Ludgate Hill, the traffic rumbled to a standstill. The chamber became hushed and the insistent voice rose a tone. 'A telling question, Miss Capothy. And what did he say to it?'

* * *

Plowart said: 'The place left vacant can never be filled.'

'Oh, what negative nonsense!' she said indignantly. 'If you're going to take that argument we'll end by being ruled, legislated and administered by phantoms.'

'So we are!' He said the words on a sudden impulse and instantly regretted them.

* * *

'A very significant heart cry, ladies and gentlemen of the jury! His mind, he said, was full of phantoms. How many men who have walked to the gallows have chronicled the same strange phenomena? I solemnly submit that conscience destroys a man's sense of reality only in a case of extreme guilt. Who in all our community is haunted with remorse? Only the guilty!'

* * *

Plowart met her surprised eyes and smiled apologetically. 'I beg your pardon. Phantoms! I didn't mean that, of course. My mind was wandering for a moment.'

'Another cup of tea?' Her voice was abruptly restrained, its candour checked, and the smile had disappeared from her lips.

'Thank you, but no.' He looked up from his inspection of the floor and met her eyes fixed steadily on his face. Their gaze remained locked until he said banteringly: 'Have I disgusted you with my lack of concentration? It was most impolite, and

I apologise for it. But you should have recognised I was incapable of small talk when we first met.' His burning eyes contradicted the playful tone although he was not aware of it.

She continued to stare at him with a troubled air of indecision, then with sudden resolution she burst out: 'Why are you guarding everything you say? You haven't uttered a word that hasn't been immediately qualified or cancelled the instant you said it. I tried to overlook it the first few times, thinking I was imagining it, but I wasn't at all! What in Heaven's name is wrong, Plowart?'

Plowart offered her a cigarette, his face inscrutable. When she refused, he lit one for himself. 'Why', he said, 'I'm in an academic mood today. Tomorrow I shall be impulsive, I promise you.'

'But today you're afraid!'

'I'm afraid of nothing and nobody!' he shouted. 'Nothing! Do you understand?'

Ignoring his claim, she repeated more calmly: 'You're afraid. I don't know what it is that makes you afraid, or why it should; I only know that you are.'

The words should have stung him into fresh disclaimers but instead he was aware of a sudden peace. Her perception had uncovered evidence enough for any jury, but he knew she would never communicate it to others. With such a woman hostility was pointless. With new confidence, he blew a thin stream of cigarette smoke and said: 'I think you took my acquiescence to phantoms too seriously.'

'That has nothing to do with it! I'm talking about your fear of questions.'

'Really? Then ask any you wish.' Now that he knew she would not disclose anything he told her, he was grimly prepared to reveal everything. It would be interesting to see if she could be driven by her feminine curiosity to penetrate to the heart of the horror. If his experience was anything to go by, she would push her way to the threshold of the final answer then recoil and pretend she had not seen or smelled blood. He

smiled faintly and repeated: 'Yes, you can ask anything at all.'

Claremont was plainly taken aback by the mandate so unexpectedly offered her, and could not understand it. However, her pause was almost imperceptible before she spoke. 'Tell me the truth, Plowart, did you just come here to talk?'

'No. I wanted to use you as a witness.'

'A witness? What on earth for?'

'Should it be necessary, to testify concerning my behaviour today. I had to find someone, and you were the most generous person I could think of on this miserable island.'

She was perplexed. 'But where would I give evidence?'

He crossed his legs negligently and stubbed out the cigarette. 'At the Old Bailey. I came with the idea of using you as a witness for the defence.'

'The Old Bailey? The defence? I don't understand. Why should you call on my evidence, and for what purpose?'

'A murder trial.' He watched with cool amusement as she nervously stood up. The sun was falling on her shoulders and outside the sound of mallets striking wooden balls punctuated the morning. Claremont took a few steps across the room then turned and came back to where he was sitting. 'When did the murder take place?'

'The early hours of this morning.'

'Where, for God's sake?'

'The district of Hampstead, in North London. It was announced on the morning news bulletin. I heard it at the Siren and came straight here.'

'London!' She expelled her breath slowly, then said: 'Oh, how you frightened me! I thought at first . . . Well, never mind what I thought!'

'No, tell me. What did you think?'

She hesitated, then said: 'I thought you were a murderer. It was foolish of me. Everybody knows you're staying with Lumas and I thought he might be . . . dead.'

Plowart said coldly: 'No, he's still alive. I saw him when I left, sunning himself on the terrace after drinking all night.'

'In that case you won't be needing my help in any murder trial. Vachau is two hundred miles from London, and two hundred miles is a long round trip even for the most determined man. I saw you last evening and first thing this morning. That should be conclusive in any court! You could have done it by private plane from Guernsey, of course, but they are checked—so you're safe from suspicion. Even if the victim was your worst enemy, you can't be responsible if you were two hundred miles away.'

Her innocence was astounding: it allowed her to circle a crater at her feet without noticing it. How was it that she could see through his apparent strength to the self-division beneath, yet fail to see that a bloody hatchet in London had its handle resting on her island?

She put her hand on his shoulder and said comfortingly: 'You're overwrought. It comes of being alone, of having no friends. That's why I'll be one if you can accept me.'

'But I have many.'

She looked at him with amusement. 'I can't imagine you surrounded by friends, Plowart.'

'They're unusual friends,' he said. 'At the height of one's career one has fair-weather friends; the sort who run when there is a wane of fortune. Before reaching that height one needs foul-weather friends. Their time for running is when the police call. The law describes them as accomplices. Those are my friends.'

'Accomplices!'

'Vachau is two hundred miles from London, you know!' He watched her with a radiant smile, ready to answer any question she put.

But Claremont wanted to ask no more. When she repeated the word 'accomplices' she had paled, and as he waited she turned her back on him. She whispered: 'No. I'm not going to ask you!'

'I didn't think you would,' Plowart said. When she refused to reply, he added bitterly: 'You're afraid like all the others!'

He looked back at her as he opened the door and said softly: 'Don't forget the confidences of friendship.'

Jonathan and Benjamin shouldered their mallets as he came out on to the lawn. Jonathan said: 'You've been a jolly long time in there, I must say. We've played three games and I've lost every one of them.'

'Well, those twenty seconds of seniority will help you win more important games,' Plowart said.

'Sorry we shan't be able to see you get an exciting time here,' Benjamin said. 'We go back to school tomorrow.'

'Your sister told me. I'm sorry, too.'

'Your own fault,' Jonathan told him cheerfully. 'You should have come a couple of days sooner. I think I'll pull Claremont out for another game, it may change my luck. Goodbye!'

Plowart waved to them both and walked away feeling far more confident than when he had come. Every step he took dissipated the shock of hearing his name coupled with Bourcey's in the bulletin, and increased the certainty that the linking was in no way ominous. It had even served as a further test of his strength. A test from which he had emerged triumphant. He walked along the cliffs with a growing sense of exhilaration. The girl at the Seigniorie had given him a feeling of inferiority yesterday; he could confess it now because he had triumphed over her. It was always the same with such people; they communicated an impression of strength that was invariably disproved under trial. She had imagined he was afraid to tell the truth, but it was she who had flinched. Plowart smiled derisively. The truth was as effective as a hatchet for some people!

He had been a fool to be misled by her, of course. The mere fact that she was shrewd enough to understand a certain amount from watching a stranger's actions did not mean that she possessed any extraordinary intellectual powers that could solve his trouble. It was he who had ascribed them to her. He had maintained the delusion even in the face of the orthodox religious paraphernalia on her walls, the femininity of her vase

arrangements, and finally those trifling pieces of confectionery she had called her speciality. But the truth had shattered that particular delusion, just as it shattered everything held sacred by fools. His position was perilous because he was too close to the truth. If he occasionally deceived himself, he undeceived himself more completely than the others, whatever the cost. The extreme cost was always isolation, but he had grown familiar with his empty landscape and could even see its advantages. Others had delusions about love and companionship—but so much the worse for them! Well, he was alone! The summit of vision was too small to hold more than one; and, even if it was not, who wanted company on that high peak?

Even so the girl attracted him. But did that mean she could be a companion, or have any kind of affinity with him? It was utter and complete nonsense. Perhaps he had been wrong in discrediting her, but that did not mean he had to go to the other extreme merely because she had promised to help him. The devil with that!

He crossed through the garden and pulled open the french windows, expecting to see Lumas or his wife. There was no sign of either. The cripple had probably gone to bed to sleep off the effects of his night's debauch.

Plowart climbed the stairs savouring, for the first time since hearing the bulletin, his sole leadership of the New Britain League. Bourcey was gone, and the League even now was recruiting thousands of young, ardent men and women to bring a new epoch to life and a new name of fire to the scroll of history.

Six

It was early afternoon and he had been writing steadily for three hours; twelve letters were finished and already folded in their envelopes. One, to *The Times*, expressed his feeling of desolation at the news of his comrade's tragic death, together with a carefully worded tribute to the dead man and an appreciation of his work for the New Britain League. It was a judicious contribution of six hundred words which should fill the better part of a column on the obituary page and with luck find a prominent place among those prelates and generals made venerable only by their decease.

Sir Gregory would always be remembered, he had written, if not by the general public, then by himself and other members of the League as the man who, above all, had forged the Movement to its present effectiveness. If he, Plowart, had spearheaded the political crusade, and therefore was more of a romantic platform figurehead, it was Sir Gregory who had worked and planned in the background to eliminate the difficulties of organisational expansion. Although it was superfluous to mention Sir Gregory's public work to informed readers of *The Times* . . .

The offering both delicately under-evaluated Bourcey's role in the League and placed the appropriate sentiments on record should the occasion arise when such a record would prove invaluable.

The other letters were addressed to the members of the Executive Council of the League. Plowart urged them to close ranks against the possibility of fresh onslaughts by political adversaries who were becoming alarmed at the growth of the League (for he was sure, whatever the police might think,

that Sir Gregory was the victim of political extremists). Sir Gregory and himself had never had reason to doubt the loyalty of the Executive in the past and he held to that confidence now he had been delegated with the sole responsibility for the complex but militant policies that must be pursued through the difficult and changing times ahead . . .

As he licked the flap of the last envelope he was distracted by the sound of someone climbing the attic ladder. He turned as Anne Lumas reached the trapdoor and the vacuous impassivity of her face, more than her actual intrusion, sent a wave of irritation through him. He greeted her peremptorily: 'I'm afraid you've fallen into the bad habit of thinking this room belongs to you, Mrs Lumas. I'd be grateful if you got rid of the idea for the month I'm here.' He turned his attention back to the letters with a studied indifference to her that was a dismissal in itself. She paused for a moment, torn between retiring with her pride and the determination to fulfil her errand, then crossed over to the table and waited until he looked up.

'I must speak to you.'

'So I see,' he said dryly. 'What do you want this time ?'

'You must move, Plowart. It's imperative!' Seeing he was unmoved, she said: 'Can't you see, I wouldn't beg if I weren't desperate ?'

Plowart gathered the envelopes together and tapped them neatly together on the table. 'We've already agreed that I am not going to move,' he said. 'Why do you persist ?'

She hesitated, then said, 'He's coming tonight. If he finds you here and Christopher on guard at the windows he'll run amok. I don't care what happens to you, but Christopher is helpless; a cripple, a drunkard and a dreamer. He thinks he's being clever, giving this room to someone like you, but he's only endangering himself. For all our sakes, take the other room and don't interfere. Christopher doesn't need to know.'

He shook his head. 'You should find a more impressionable audience for your warnings, Mrs Lumas.' He stood up and

struggled into his raincoat, then nodded brusquely and clambered down the steps, leaving her alone in the room. Something about the woman infuriated him and as he descended to the hall he was able to pinpoint it. She was a woman who had conquered men; that serenity of hers was nothing more than a quiet contempt for all of them. No man had the power or virility to move her now. She simply chose them like chess pieces for playing particular gambits. Even an outright failure, as in this case, did not anger her; it merely inconvenienced or delayed her. But he would inconvenience her more before he was finished! Women like Anne Lumas challenged the superiority of men and should be put down. He would put her down!

Lumas was not in the drawing-room so he went back into the hall and shouted for him. At the third call, the cripple came hobbling from the rear part of the house. In the dimness of the hall he looked like some animal advancing along the side of the wall, breathing heavily from the exertion of coming too quickly. 'Is it you, Plowart?' He was carrying a bottle of gin, but showed no sign of drunkenness yet. 'You shouldn't shout like that until there's something worth shouting about,' he said testily. 'My nerves are bad enough without you making them worse!'

Plowart took his arm and said: 'I want to tell you something important. I've just been speaking to your wife. Come into the drawing-room.'

He kept his grip on Lumas's arm and helped him into the room and on to his chair, while the cripple kept twisting around and whispering: 'What's wrong? What's all this secretiveness? Has something happened?'

When he was seated, Plowart said coldly: 'Your wife has just been serving me threats of murder and violence unless I give up the attic. She says this lover of hers will kill us both if he finds his room occupied.'

Lumas covered Plowart's hand on the table with his own and said beseechingly: 'But you're not going to give in, are

you, Plowart? You're not a man to be intimidated, surely? You can't desert me? If you do, I'll never stop them! No, not alone! Never!

'I refused, of course,' Plowart said, contemptuous of the man's whining. 'I wanted your view since she says you'll be attacked, too.'

Reassured of Plowart's support, Lumas sat back jubilantly. 'He doesn't frighten me! No, by God, he's found his match here, legs or no legs! We'll drive him from his lair and see what he looks like, eh?'

'That will be sooner than you think. Your wife expects him here tonight.' He watched with amusement as his companion involuntarily recoiled.

'Tonight! How do you know? Has she let you into her confidence?'

'Only sufficiently to add substance to her warning,' Plowart said. 'But he may even come sneaking around this afternoon, so if you intend to keep him out you ought to stay in that chair watching the windows: I can't keep you company, I'm afraid; I have to leave a batch of letters at the harbour.'

'Don't worry. I'll watch those windows without blinking, I promise you.' Lumas slopped gin into the glass in front of him and spilled an equal amount over the table. 'I knew I'd played a trump with you, Plowart!' he said, chuckling. 'She said she'd never forgive me. That it was the trick of a sly old man denying happiness to everyone around him. She kept trying to persuade me to throw you out of the house, but I held my head and wept like a beggar without bread.' He tapped his forehead, grinning at the memory of his cunning. 'I wouldn't make a word of sense of anything she said, and in the end she went away crying and claiming I was forcing her to leave me.'

Plowart said incisively: 'Well, make some sense of what I say. Don't start drinking until you've settled this business. Do you understand that?'

Lumas said sulkily: 'It gives me strength and courage. Do you expect me to wait by myself without some reinforcement?'

Seeing the amused contempt on his companion's face, he said angrily: 'You think I'm afraid, don't you? You suspect I'm shaking in my shoes, is that it?'

Plowart took the chair next to the cripple and said softly: 'So long as I stay in the attic he will be confined to rooms where you can get at him. When you do catch him, it's your own misfortune if you're afraid. It's no concern of mine. Is there anyone on Vachau who will let him have a room where he can meet your wife?'

Lumas swallowed the gin in a gulp and shook his head. 'No. Capothy has threatened to evict anyone who helps him against me. But if they could, they would; they all want to see me humiliated because I've got more money behind me than the lot of them, that's the reason!'

'Good. He has to come here then. That makes it simpler for you. All you need do is play the waiting game and keep off the bottle. Now I'd better get down to the harbour or the boat will go without these letters.'

Plowart stood up and crossed to the windows. As he stepped on to the terrace he looked back at the cripple, leaning on his elbows and smiling down at his empty glass. 'You scheming old devil,' he said softly, 'You don't really need to be told anything, do you!'

He crossed the garden with the sound of Lumas' delighted laughter following him from the windows, confirming his suspicion that the man and what he said were seldom joined in sincerity for long. He walked with his head down, brooding on the problems such specimens posed, unaware of his surroundings, other than that the path he was following led down to the harbour. If he had raised his head he would have seen Claremont approaching from the opposite direction with her hair covered by a silk scarf. She had thrown a checkered coat over her shoulders like a cape, which the wind caught and swirled behind her as she walked. He almost collided with her when she stopped directly in his path. 'What the . . .!' he said, recovering himself. 'Oh, it's you!'

'I was just coming to see you,' the girl said, her manner and words reflecting a determination to waste no words. 'I've simply got to know, Plowart! When you said I was weak because I didn't ask that question, you were right . . .'

'I can't stop to talk now,' he interrupted her impatiently. 'I have a batch of letters that must go off today.'

'I'll walk down to the harbour with you.'

She fell into step beside him, and said: 'I want to know the answer to that question. Did you arrange the murder of that man in London, Plowart?'

Plowart stopped dead and stared at her for a moment then laughed heartily. She waited patiently until he resumed walking, then said: 'You promised to answer my question, and that was no answer.'

'Because you're so funny!' he said. 'Do you imagine I make a practice of baring my soul twenty-four hours a day to any strange girl who asks me? The promise I gave you was good only for this morning. You asked all the questions you wanted to and I replied with gospel honesty. When you're given the chance of rifling a bizarre wardrobe, it's not my fault you choose only to count the shirts, is it? You've asked your question too late!'

They had reached the bottom of the hill now, and together they walked over to the harbour-master's hut. There was no one there to take his letters so he threw them into the island's letterbox and they started back.

Claremont was quiet for the first part of the return journey, but at the crossroads she stopped and looked at him intently. 'I don't believe you!' she exclaimed.

Not having said anything to warrant either the vehemence or the denial, he looked at her with renewed amusement but she shook her head stubbornly, and said: 'You want me to be like all the rest and believe in your strength! Well, I don't! I shall always remember you as the weakest, most cowardly man in my life. Every one of your actions, good or vile, is manufactured by fear. Inside you there's only doubt, prevarication,

fear and despair! You can do anything—even murder—because there's nothing in the world comparable to the frightful things within you!

He had followed this tirade with gathering anger, and now, giving her no chance to go on, he grasped her shoulders and shouted: 'Shut up! Keep quiet, damn you!' Rigid in his grasp, she stared at him defiantly. Her expression provoked him to a mad passion and he flung her to the ground. She lay where she had dropped, looking up at him fearlessly. 'You're weak, Plowart!' she said exultantly. 'You can hurt me, but you can't convince me otherwise.'

Plowart stooped over her with a sudden clouding of his mind. Claremont's face whitened, seeing the hatred contorting his features, and she cried: 'Do it, Plowart! Hit me!' His hand bunched and swept up and down in a blur of driving muscle that abruptly stopped within an inch of her face, leaving him as surprised as the girl herself. In the instant before his fist landed, a shaft of lucidity had telegraphed the insanity of damaging someone able to help him and simultaneously frozen the impetus of his arm. He stared at her as at a stranger, disturbed by her dilated eyes and paleness; then, inexplicably moved, his hand fumbled across her cheek and stroked where her hair began beside her ear. 'I'm sorry,' he said painfully. 'But you should understand me better than anyone. Did I hurt you?'

'No. I'm all right.' She looked at him speculatively as he helped her up. The coat had fallen in a puddle and muddy water had stained the sleeves. 'Don't worry; I'll carry it over my arm,' he said. 'It will soon dry.'

'Plowart, come where we can talk without being seen,' she said, taking his arm urgently. 'I must know more about you if I'm to help.'

'What do you want to know?' he inquired, his mind still occupied with the strange recognition that had paralysed his arm.

'What you intend to do. I told you there was a way to

absolute strength and self-supremacy, but if I'm to show you I must be sure of your intentions.'

Plowart struck his forehead: of course, that was it! It was this power of hers that had stopped his blow. He looked at her with animation and said: 'Wherever you choose.'

'Come along then,' she said, smiling. 'I'll show you my favourite place for solitude.' She pulled his arm and led him across the gorse towards a part of the cliffs between the harbour and the crossroads. As they worked their way along, Plowart said: 'No ill feelings?'

'Of course not. It was my fault, anyway. I was experimenting with you,' she said over her shoulder. As she said this, they came to a long thin peninsula that protruded some three hundred yards beyond the rest of the cliff line. The finger of rock was not more than ten or twelve feet wide and it was remarkable that the action of the sea had not severed it long ago from the rest of Vachau. They walked its length before Claremont sat down and beckoned him to come beside her. 'Do you like it?' she asked.

'Well, there's no chance of being overheard, if that's what you mean,' Plowart said.

'You see, I think of your comfort before my own,' Claremont said cryptically. Before he had time to ask precisely what she meant by this, she said calmly: 'Now tell me what you think of humanity, Plowart.'

He said: 'If you want to talk, let's talk of real things. You don't want my ideas on humanity to spoil the scene, surely?'

She rejected his light-hearted evasion angrily. 'Do you think I want idle conversation? I'm asking this for a definite purpose! What are your views, now?'

'Then have them!' Plowart told her grimly. 'Humanity is nothing at all. Everything it does, all its fine sentiments are empty and inconsequential. The only people who take it seriously are sentimentalists.'

'I started off as a burning idealist, imagining that everything

accomplished by Man was a tangible step to greatness and part of a mystical, but pre-determined plan for him to inherit the universe. I looked at men like Æschylus, Dante, Ibsen and Shaw and saw what Man could do at his most sublime. But I also saw that none of them had changed the slow subsiding into the slime that is Man's story over the centuries. The greatest of them postulated a complete man without defects, but it took realists like Plato and Pascal to show the folly of that conceit. In fact, the moment one conceives the meaning of human greatness is the moment when one understands the baseness, the triviality and the meanness of the material from which we have to mould it.

'It took me a long time to recognise that Man was base and worthless, but when I did, I saw clearly for the first time. The Me that was a young idealist thought Man's highest state was happiness. The name of sterility itself! But eventually, when I saw the true baseness, I was able to reject all thoughts of happiness and look dispassionately on what we regard as our achievements.

'Have you ever done that, Claremont? . . . Looked closely at our achievements? You'd better take a microscope or you won't see them!

'We talk profoundly of our civilisation as if it were a triumph of human unity and advancement, a massive improvement on the classic Greek leagues, but the truth is that it's no more than an arena of warring economies using nets instead of the swords of honest war. Do you think America would worry about helping us to survive if her economy seriously suffered in the process? Isn't it the same with Britain, France and Germany? This alliance of nations is nothing more than cushioned aggression with the same basic aims as a war of aggrandisement, but without the honesty; and the cost to the losers is always the same. All our standards and values are masked by pretence, ambiguity and hypocrisy. With all our talk of progress, the fact is that stupid vanity and avarice are as much with us today as they were with neolithic man. The

only difference is that he was almost inarticulate, so he had less opportunity of being dishonest!

Claremont, who had listened thoughtfully throughout, interrupted: 'But you must admit that this hypocrisy, as you call it, this act of disguising a disgraceful fact by another name, is a symptom of disgust. Humanity may not just yet be what it thinks it should be, but it's advanced from the open, unashamed evil to the halfway stage of hypocrisy. The full stage of repudiation becomes easier because the way is shorter. And I noticed that you didn't mention cruelty. Don't you think violence and cruelty have been exorcised by Christianity?'

Plowart said contemptuously: 'More euphemisms! You and people like you have taken away the purity and truth of violence and made it criminal. But have you renounced it? What sells your newspapers if it's not wars, crime and stories of perverted sexual escapades? Why do you think boxing and wrestling matches are more popular than ballet or chamber music recitals? What makes Wagner the most fashionable composer? It's true, violence leads a ruptured existence, but everyone still practices it. Only now it's all in the imagination, of course, and that makes a world of difference!'

'There's a world of difference between killing someone and imagining killing someone, Plowart,' she said steadily. 'I fancy the change is for the better.'

'But there's one aspect you don't take into account,' he retorted, 'and that is that violence is an outgrowth of belief! Unless humanity rediscovers the power to believe it will remain nothing, for the effort to be something is too great. But if it does find its way back to belief, it will battle its way to the kind of men Ibsen and Shaw imagined, and nothing less will satisfy it. If that's true, can you imagine what form of belief can dispense with passion and violence? I confess that I can't.

'Now do you see why I can't agree with you about violence? Do you expect me to follow everybody else and describe a defeat for humanity as a victory? Of course I don't agree with

cruelty, but if it's necessary in restoring passion and, more particularly the power to believe, then it's a trifling penalty!

'Each time you examine Man's baseness you arrive at his apathy, a spiritual exhaustion that blocks his ability to determine right from wrong. You can blame Christian ethics and morals for that, where the West is concerned. How can living things grow in stagnant water? I asked myself that question a hundred times with always the same answer: they cannot.

'Very well then, as soon as one recognises that human baseness is the result of apathy, one takes the path of a St. Dominic or a Torquemada. They knew the disasters facing men who broke from the warmth of orthodox belief, just as they knew their names would be reviled by posterity in the light of the Inquisition. But do you think they were so unimaginative, so insensitive they did not flinch at the shrieks of the heretics on their racks? Yet they were prepared to suffer the vilification of posterity and the knowledge of their responsibility for suffering so long as the amputations saved the majority. Because they believed more ardently than others, they had the strength to fly in the face of pity and commit what seem barbaric atrocities to us today.'

'As a point of historical fact,' Claremont said curtly, 'That sort of soul-saving ripped the Catholic religion apart. The motives may have been warm-hearted but the salvation Torquemada offered was only from the damnation of his own heating irons. He perverted the Catholic truths by taking Hell into his own hands.'

'He had a sense of responsibility, at least,' Plowart said warmly. 'But your criticisms illustrate what I maintained: we have replaced the religious passions with Christian social virtues, and to talk of Man's triumph in terms of mercy, charity or compassion is as senseless as expecting to find a Christ standing his turn of beers in a Paddington public house. Why should we think pain is morally or spiritually bad, for ourselves or for others? You condemn Torquemada because

he enlisted pain to forward his purpose, but the argument is an emotional one that doesn't stand scrutiny.

'No, humanity has advanced on the back of an eternity of agony and when the torture stops, so do we. Our strength and our future depend not on the abolition of pain and unhappiness but on our stoicism to endure more pain and unhappiness than has ever gone before. Your sort cries against wars, torture and injustice. I say that, since all are means of education, they should continue.'

'Wait a moment,' Claremont objected : 'according to your absolutism, everything should be totally good or totally bad and anything between is decay. Is that what you're saying?'

He shrugged. 'Since everything is between extremes today and decay is the universal condition, it's not an altogether wrong argument.'

'Today, if one so much as lays a hand on a man, he shouts out he is a victim of oppression and authority. Men and women associate and identify themselves with those around them until they have no individual distinction at all. They have become beasts in their agreement to share the same social treatment. That's the contemporary tragedy; that a man can't be separated from the rest and offered new values. He's been conditioned to the herd responses and there's no majesty of self left. That's the outcome of this democracy of ours!'

'Do you want to know the future of our species—that is unless a miracle retrieves us? A gradual evolution to nothingness! We're so embryonic we haven't developed to the point where we can distinguish between what is spiritually, mentally and emotionally healthy and what is unhealthy, and because we are self-contemptuous, we accept someone else's stupid notions and jettison our own. We might advance, even under the handicap of a common set of values, if they were based on sound ideas of health and decay, but they aren't. Nor ever will be as long as we go on respecting the happiness of the individual and setting that as the supreme ideal. We're cripples—blinkerered, broken-backed and bandy-legged! And because we

all have the same defects we not only think we're healthy, but worth respecting and preserving! That's your compassion!

Claremont pushed her dark hair away from her face, and turned away from her contemplation of the sea. 'And what's this saving miracle of yours?'

'A group of men strong and daring enough to scorn Christian values. If they work to a plan they can rip the dossier of failure in two and galvanise humanity to a new Renaissance of speculation and achievement. But not if they are compassionate!'

Claremont said musingly: 'So you believe in St. Dominic and Torquemada, death and torture, progress and retrogression?' It only confirmed what she had already guessed.

'Naturally. And all the conquerors, revolutionaries, visionaries and plain reformers through history. I go with the men who shout for change and force it, if need be, at the cost of violence and bloodshed.'

She sighed as she asked: 'Then if a man obstructed your ideas, you would kill without compunction?'

He smiled, instantly alert to her stratagem. 'So you're interrogating me? I suppose this is what you've been working up to from the beginning? You're worse than the police!'

'As it happens,' she said, unperturbed by her failure, 'I *am* the police here in my father's absence. Absurd, isn't it! However, you haven't confessed to murder, so I shan't arrest you.'

'I'm glad,' Plowart said dryly. 'But now you've heard my views are you going to oblige me with what I want to know?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'With your views you would be a tyrant tomorrow, if you were given the chance.'

'That's nothing to do with it,' he said. 'You gave a promise, if I remember correctly.'

She said reflectively, 'It's ironic. Here I am considering helping a man who represents everything I find hateful and unhealthy. Why should I help you, Plowart? I gave that promise to someone I didn't know!'

'If you helped me end these cursed nightmares and achieve

self-supremacy, possibly my way of thinking would change to yours,' he suggested cunningly. 'That's logical, isn't it?'

'Logical, but not very realistic,' she said coolly. 'I said I would show you and I will—if you're prepared to take a gamble?'

'I accept!' he said confidently.

'Look over the edge to the sea.'

He stared at her in silence for a moment, then said: 'Very well!' He turned over on his stomach and inched forward to the edge of the broken rock where safety ended. Fifty feet below, an outgrowth of rock pointed from the face of the cliff in the shape of a spur sloping downward. The spur was about twenty feet long, he estimated. Where the spur ended was a drop of about 100 feet to the sea below, washing in and out of the cliff base and whitening everywhere on protruding rocks. He squirmed back beside her and said: 'Very picturesque. But what has it to do with me?'

'That spur fifty feet below is called the White Feather; according to tradition it was used to test braggarts and cowards. The challenge is to climb down to it, crawl along the spur to its tip, and then come back. If you do it, you will have proved yourself, and I'll gladly show you whatever you want.'

'Oh, come! I don't believe anyone has ever climbed down to it,' he said. 'Nobody but a suicidal fool would risk it! However, if I refuse, you won't help me—is that it?'

'Exactly,' Claremont said.

'And furthermore, you don't think I will accept, do you?'

'You'd be a fool if you did,' she said, provocatively. 'If you slip off—and it slopes all the way to the tip—you'll have no chance of escaping with those rocks underneath.'

'I'm beginning to follow your reasoning,' he said. He was unbuttoning his raincoat as he was speaking. 'You've promised to help me, but as you've now decided I'm a menace to humanity, rather than break your promise, you offer me an impossible test to extricate yourself honourably.' He slipped

out of his jacket and pulled off his tie and shoes. 'Well, there won't be an honourable extrication! But in exchange for what you can give me, I shall teach you two lessons. First, that with sufficient will-power a man can conquer any hazard. Second, that even if I fall, I shall not die. Like all great men I've an unconquerable life force, beside which a few rocks are nothing.'

'I'm waiting to see you try it,' Claremont said. Despite these words, her eyes were fixed on his with a pitiful appeal he could not interpret.

'Don't think I'm altogether a fool,' he said, watching her. 'I realise you brought me here expressly to confront me with this situation. If I doubted for a second you had the power to mend this self-division of mine, I should tell you to go to the devil. But twice you've shown yourself exceptional in small ways and I'm prepared to take a gamble if only for the satisfaction of leaving you with no excuse to fob me off.'

He swung his legs over into space and sat on the edge of the cliff with the wind clutching him, looking down at the spur and estimating the nature of the descent. Outwardly, he was unmoved by the risks involved, but within he was a vortex of speculations on how the problem could be solved. Beneath these practical speculations was an exultant ecstasy that sprang from the sheer excitement of trafficking with death.

Far out, the waters were smooth but, directly below, white eruptions where the rocks came up in teeth-like formations, made it a natural battlefield.

Looking down, he was aware it was for just such ordeals as this that the complicated machinery of his mind had been designed . . . just sufficient to drive his body forward where nobody else would go; just harmonious enough to knit his body into an obedient chain of responses; just wilful enough to assume it could be done without the imagination forming pictures of the consequences of a drop. But it was also a machine calculating enough to inquire prosaically of the girl: 'Is it true others have done this before?'

He smiled when she did not reply and, instead of pressing,

asked: 'Do you suppose the spur will take my weight at its tip?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I've never seen it reached.'

'Well, you will now.'

After a quick glance at the sky, he eased himself over the edge and started to make his way down to the spur. From above the face had seemed difficult, but getting his fingers and toes tightly into it was childishly easy. Deep splitting gave him a means of descent as regular and reliable as ladder rungs. As this assistance was not visible to the girl, it seemed to her that he was swarming down an almost perpendicular wall. With this in mind, he maliciously swung free from the rock at several points on his way down and clung by what seemed to be only the most meagre fingerholds. Fifteen feet above the spur the splitting ended and he dropped down easily upon its broad base. Standing upright, he turned and waved up, then turned back to the business of negotiating his way down.

From the cliff-top the spur had looked dangerously thin and tapering, but at least three-quarters of its length was strong enough to take four times his weight. The chief difficulty was the acute angle of its slope. It was quite smooth with not a tuft of vegetation anywhere to use as a brake if he went plunging down it. He debated whether to straddle it and inch his way along or go forward on his belly. The choice was settled by a gust of wind that threw him slightly off balance so he had to cling on with his arms and legs. Another four feet down the spur, straddled as he was, and he would have been precipitated into the sea.

He had not looked down once since beginning the descent, but on his belly he had to, and the remoteness of the water became startlingly real. The realisation of how far his body would plunge if he slipped grew larger and more menacing in his mind, and from the pores of his face and scalp beads of perspiration started to gather and gleam in the late sunlight. Where his palms gripped the edges of the rock they left damp crescents. The further he went down the spur, the more acute

grew the angle of descent until finally he was using his hands and all the strength of his elbows and shoulders to prevent himself shooting down.

With about six feet to go before reaching the tip, the spur began to tremble and vibrate beneath him. He imagined at first that he could turn around and edge his way back, but the rock shook perceptibly with every movement he made and he had to stop. There was no going back now; the only chance was to work his way forward to the end, reducing the drop as much as he could and placing himself in position for a clean dive into the least dangerous part of the waters underneath. He wriggled his way down with the rock now breaking away steadily beneath him.

During these last seconds a host of impressions swarmed through his brain. He fought off these distractions, groaning with rage as he struggled forward to cut off the last possible inch of the dive. The rock began to sag, settle itself, and sag again.

As it went through the slow movements of crumbling it carried on it a man whose personality broke away at a faster pace, leaving a living quantity obsessed with the desire to survive. The last human thought in his mind as the angle sharpened was of the jagged teeth, then like a pistol crack the spur snapped and disintegrated, sending him down to the water in a storm of rocks.

He hit the water cleanly, and went under surrounded by the dark shapes of the rubble. At a depth when he thought his lungs would burst he reached the end of his dive and went curving up like an acrobat borne on a glittering trapeze of bubbles. His breath left him about three feet before reaching the surface but he only had time for one mouthful of water before he burst up into the air, coughing and spitting.

The water was still boiling and seething thirty yards away where the mass of rock had fallen. From the centre of it a spout of muck was rising, darkening a growing area of the water. Plowart swam through the discoloration wearily, his

arms rising and falling with the slow care of an amphibian whose memory of the water had dimmed. When he was on the other side of the muck he was within reaching distance of the slimy rocks leaning out along the base of the cliffs. He made several attempts to pull himself up, but each time his fingers slipped through their green fungus and he was carried on, too weak to resist. He was gradually brought to a small apron of shingle and here he pulled himself half out of the water before collapsing and losing consciousness. He came to twice but lapsed back into darkness both times without improving on his position. The third time he dragged himself heavily from the water and crawled as far as he could up the shingle and fell asleep.

He was awakened by the rain. It came splashing on him in a flurry from the sea. In his half-delirious state it seemed one more deliberate aggravation and he staggered to his feet and set about finding a way up from the shore. It was already dusk making visibility bad, but he was rewarded almost immediately by a wide cleft cutting through the cliffs, dense with small trees.

The cleft took him to within two hundred yards of the crossroads and its cluster of lights from the shops. Back on familiar ground, he slowly made his way home in a stupor of tiredness that concentrated itself only on the prospect of bed, there to sleep until the memory of the breaking rock was obliterated.

He reached the house almost asleep on his feet and found the french windows wide open and Lumas snoring drunkenly with his head between his arms on the table. Under the glow of the lamp his white hair was boyishly golden. He made no movement when Plowart went through the room, and, in his besotted condition, he would not have stirred if a whole squadron of cavalry had ridden through.

Plowart nearly fell several times on his way up the stairs and once he fell against the banisters with his full weight and shook the house, but nobody came to investigate. At the top

of the ladder, with his eyes level with the floorboards of his room, something warned him someone was waiting in the dark.

'Who's here?' he asked in a low voice.

A deep, resonant voice said promptly: 'Don't stand there gawping, Man! If you want to see me, come in.' The voice came from the direction of the bed. Plowart climbed up, went to the table and lit the candle.

The flame revealed a massive man in a glistening black raincoat, still running with rain, sitting on the side of the bed. He was about forty-eight with slightly greying hair and an air of immense strength and energy about him. The face was strong, with a sharp beak of a nose and a grizzled cleft chin. The mouth, however, was womanish with fruit-red lips. This unpleasant feature, together with the restlessness of the man's flecked brown eyes, inclined the whole face from strength to gross sensuality. The head was huge, larger than any human head Plowart had ever seen, almost bordering on the freakish. After this cursory scrutiny, Plowart went over to the armchair and sat down heavily. 'Who the devil are you?' he muttered. 'What are you doing here?'

'My name's Bernard Lachanell, if it means anything to you. I've come about . . . ' He stopped and looked at Plowart with sudden concern. 'What's up with you, Friend? What's put you in that state?'

'If you get out I can rest,' Plowart said listlessly. He had been attempting to prop his head against the back of the armchair to keep his eyes open, but his head kept drooping and each time he had to make an effort to raise it again. The room seemed to shrink as the man stood up, his head close to the ceiling. When he came across to the armchair his height and breadth almost blotted out the light and sent a large part of the room into shadow.

'You're wet through, that's the trouble,' he said, somewhat superfluously. 'Now, let's put a little life in you before anything else!' He rummaged inside his raincoat and produced a flat silver flask which he unscrewed and passed to Plowart. 'Good

whisky, Friend. Go on, it may be firewater but it's not poison to all of us.'

Plowart gulped down several mouthfuls and felt it slowly lighting up his stomach, filling him with fresh energy.

He would have gone on drinking indefinitely if Lachanell had not taken the flask from his hands, chuckling: 'Pull it thin, there! I like to keep something back in the cellar, you know!'

'Sorry,' Plowart murmured. 'I'm feeling better now. What do you want?'

The man was following every word he uttered with a fixed smile, trembling on the point of laughter, as if he were repeating the syllables silently to himself. He surveyed Plowart for a few seconds more, then actually did laugh. 'That's good, isn't it!' He prodded Plowart with his finger and said: 'I want this room to myself, that's what! Not only that, but I want the pictures and carpet back, too. What's the idea of making the place a barracks? Who asked you in?'

Plowart looked at the man with a faint flash of interest. So this was her lover! 'Haven't you seen her, yet?' he asked. 'I should have thought she would have already told you.'

'She's nowhere around. There's only him, snoring away, in the house.'

'During a time when he wasn't snoring,' Plowart said, 'he asked me to take over this room for the month I'm here. It seemed he didn't like the idea of an uninvited guest helping himself to a room and his wife. I'm supposed to keep you out. It's very simple, but I'm afraid you've caught me at a bad moment.'

The smile faded from the man's face and he went to the bed and sat down. 'I thought he'd do something like this,' he exclaimed. 'What did she say about it?'

'She'll probably tell you all about it when she sees you,' Plowart said. 'I don't listen to what either of them say half the time. Now would you mind getting out and letting me go to bed?'

Lachanell crossed the room and seized Plowart by the shirt,

his face contorted. 'Are you asking for it?' he said roughly. No expression appeared on Plowart's face and he made no attempt to free himself. Met by this unexpected passivity, Lachanell's rage instantly evaporated, and he released Plowart's shirt and patted him on the shoulder. 'You're safe enough, Friend,' he said shame-facedly. 'I bait easily, I warn you.'

'I sympathise,' Plowart said. 'But I suggest you get a room at the Siren for tonight.' The exhaustion made everything about this interview unreal, and his interest in the man's identity had been only momentary, mostly the result of the whisky. Now that the effects of the spirit were diminishing he felt a slight, childish petulance that Lachanell did not get about his business and leave him alone.

The bulky man watched him with the same faint smile on his lips that had been there before he lost his temper. He corrected: 'You're the one who's going to move, Friend, not me. There's nowhere else where me and Anne can spend the night together. Do you think I've come here just to sit and drink at the Siren?'

'I don't know,' Plowart said, dreamily. 'Neither do I care.' He stood up and started to pull off his shirt and then his shoes and socks. The shoes were tight and sodden, holding to his feet obstinately. When he got them off, water spilled out on to the floorboards. The socks peeled from flesh that was white and dead.

Lachanell watched in silence, then said abruptly: 'You're in a bad way tonight so I'll not press my rights. I'll come back tomorrow and we'll have a talk.'

'I shouldn't waste your time,' Plowart said. 'I shan't change my mind about staying here.' He threw his trousers across the room and they fell in a heap in the corner, leaving a wet mark where they had hit the wall. When he was completely stripped he began to run a towel over his body with slow, laborious movements.

Lachanell grunted, then said: 'I don't make the mistake of taking you seriously. I'll be back tomorrow to prove it! My

mistake was letting her persuade me she should stay here with the old fool. But he's not content with that! Now he wants all of her and none of me, eh? Well, she's coming away with me for good. Tell him that from me! He's had enough favours, battenning on to her pity, and sucking the life from her. But he won't put one over on me. See how he likes it in this damned hole alone!

Plowart climbed into bed and closed his eyes without bothering to reply. After a moment he heard Lachanell angrily descend the ladder, but he was more concerned with trying to stop his mind from whirling thoughts into a dizzying roundabout of nonsense. Within a few minutes he was oblivious of everything but blackness.

Seven

He was at the height of his triumphs. Two burly men were chairing him through cheering crowds and a military band was blaring a jaunty march tune. Over the heads of a throng stretching into the distance, he saw the banners of the New Britain League — the compass insignia on the ash grey surround — fluttering from the flagpoles. And then it came . . .

The crowd opened as though carved apart by a gigantic knife and down this avenue a low-slung sports coupé with a long bonnet came careering straight at him. He just had time to glimpse the quartet of blue uniformed men inside before the silver radiator, flanked by two staring headlights, sheared down his two bearers and sent him flying to one side with an impression of merciless faces imprinted on his mind. Lying on his face in the gutter he heard the screech of brakes, the opening of car doors and the sound of footsteps advancing briskly.

The steps stopped a few feet from him and he opened his eyes under cover of his shielding arm, straining to hear what they said. All he heard was a fusillade of shots that tore into his body and the tinkle of spent bullet cases falling on to the road. He endured the first round helplessly, then in a rage of self-preservation twisted and sent himself spinning out of their line of fire.

The sudden wrench twisted his muscles and he awakened to find that he had thrown himself out of the bed and was lying spreadeagled on the floor.

The realisation that it was another nightmare brought the usual relief and anger flooding through him, then a volley of sound on the panes established a relevance between the night-

mare and reality. He got to his feet and padded over to the side of the nearest window, carefully keeping out of sight of anyone below. Beneath, a small figure was bent gathering another handful of stones. As Plowart watched he straightened and hurled up another volley that crackled sharply across the glass.

It was Jonathan. The boy peered up anxiously but Plowart remained concealed. After a few moments Jonathan shook his head impatiently and set off at a jogtrot through the garden. Plowart noticed he was wearing an immaculate blazer and flannels that looked fresh from the cleaners. It made a great difference to the dishevelled boy he had met a few days ago.

As soon as he was sure the boy had gone, Plowart stood in front of the window and looked down into the garden. 'No, Claremont,' he said, 'I'm not dead.'

He remembered that this was the last day of the boys' holiday and that they were going back to England. Jonathan's haste, he imagined, would be to get back to the Seigniorie to tell Claremont what she wanted to know, before they all went down to the harbour. Would she be escorting them back?

He turned away moodily and saw for the first time a large tank of calor gas standing against the wall with a number of other items stacked beside it. He crossed the room and discovered the tank was connected to a small portable cooking range, standing only ten or eleven inches high and with two gas rings. Around the range were a couple of aluminium saucepans, a frying pan, a kettle, a teapot and miscellaneous table items that included a milk jug, sugar bowl and two cups and saucers. On the other side of the tank were tins of ham, pilchards, sardines, pineapples and other foods.

He surveyed the store with mystification until he remembered Lachanell's visit the night before. At the recollection he smiled ironically. The man had a liking for home comforts, it seemed. Since, if he had his way, the tomato grower would not be coming back for them, the provisions and equipment would help to make his own occupation more agreeable.

Plowart glanced at his watch and was surprised to find it was noon. He filled one of the small saucepans with water and put it on the range, then pulled on his trousers, socks and shoes. When the water was warm he shaved and washed in hot water for the first time since arriving on Vachau.

Slipping on his shirt it occurred to him that Lachanell had not only entered the house but, judging by the stores, had made several journeys. The precautions against intruders would have to be intensified, but that depended on whether Lumas could be gingered into remaining sober.

When he went downstairs Lumas was sitting at the drawing-room table with a book propped in front of him. He looked up guiltily when Plowart came into the room and tried to hide his discomfort under a show of cordiality. 'Good day to you, Plowart!' he exclaimed. 'You're sleeping late and resting yourself, I see. All for the coming exertions, eh? Splendid!'

Plowart said, coldly: 'I thought I told you not to drink yesterday?'

'Well, so you did!' His host spread his hands deprecatingly. 'But what's wrong with one or two small glasses, eh? Because you came in and obviously saw me napping, you mustn't misunderstand . . .'

Seeing the contempt on Plowart's face he swallowed and said defensively: 'I would have woken instantly if that rogue had come within an inch of the house, Plowart, believe me. It was merely a nap and nothing more.'

'He did come near the house,' Plowart said curtly. 'Not only near, it but I found him waiting in my room when I got back. His kitchen-ware and cooking supplies for the next fortnight are piled in my room now. While you were 'napping' he must have made a half dozen journeys past your drunken ears, besides dragging a heavy tank of calor gas up the ladder. He must have kicked up enough din to wake the dead! What d'you say to that?'

The cripple's face paled, then he shouted: 'Here? You're wrong. You're playing with me . . . I can prove it! Watch this.'

He pulled himself off the chair and dragged his body across to the french windows. When he reached them, he took a small brass bell from an occasional table to one side of them and tinkled it loudly. 'There you are, Plowart!' he said triumphantly. 'It rings!'

'So it does,' Plowart said cuttingly. 'But what has that to do with it?'

'Ah, a lot, Plowart. In this little bell I have a sentry! While I was waiting for you to come back I left the windows ajar with the bell balanced on top. As soon as anyone opened them . . .' he paused impressively, then swung the bell, filling the room with its jangle.

'Put it up there while I go outside,' Plowart said.

He waited on the terrace until the bell was balanced on the top of the windows, then pushed them apart and caught the bell neatly as it fell, muffling the clapper against his palm so that it made no sound.

'So much for your little sentry,' he said. Ignoring the chagrin on the other's face, he went back on to the terrace and brought the windows together with one hand while holding the bell above them with the other. When they were close enough, he set the bell on top of them, holding it deftly with the clapper between his two fingers. Having demonstrated Lachanell's tactics, he came back into the room, catching the bell for a second time and setting it back on the table.

'Do you still think I've made the story up?' he asked.

During this performance the cripple's face had become yellow and now, without replying, he pulled himself along to his chair and sat down heavily. 'Then he did come,' he whispered. 'I didn't believe you because I told my wife to warn him I was in the mood for murder. I thought it would keep him away, the threat of murder. I only put the bell there to make him scuttle back into the garden when it rang.'

'Lachanell knows you're afraid of him, just as I know,' Plowart said. 'You didn't think he would be intimidated by

threats sent via your wife, did you? He knows you got drunk because you didn't dare stop him, just as he knew you put up the bell to be caught!

'It's not true, Plowart!' Lumas shouted hysterically. 'I mean business! I won't have him coming into my house, making love to my wife. I won't have it, and he knows it.'

'He does now, because I've told him,' Plowart answered softly. 'When he discovered you'd given the room to me and were determined to keep him away, do you want to know what he said?'

'I don't care what he said,' Lumas muttered. 'I can stand up for myself.'

Plowart smiled. 'He said he was sick of letting his woman look after you. He talked of his generosity in leaving her here most of the year, and said he'd come to the end of his patience. He swore he was going to take her back with him and let you rot here alone. He's coming again tonight—to take her away.'

The impact of this message was even greater than Plowart had anticipated. 'Take her away!' Lumas shrieked the words like one possessed. 'Nobody will, nobody!'

He struck the table repeatedly, saliva dribbling down the side of his mouth. 'No, he shan't! I won't let him! I'll kill him first!'

'You'll need something heavier than a bell to do that,' Plowart said. 'I suggest you barricade those windows, now you know he's serious. Whenever I want to come in I'll tap three times, so don't leave them open for me again.'

'You're right, Plowart,' Lumas cried. 'I'll barricade them now! I'll pull everything in the room against them. Now nobody comes in who doesn't give three taps, and only you and I will know about them!'

He was shouting wildly with the feverishness of a man who had lost all control.

'I'm going out before you start,' Plowart said. 'If I don't give the signal when I come back, don't let me in.'

Plowart went through the french windows as Anne Lumas

came into the room, attracted, no doubt, by Lumas's shouts. He heard her exclaim in a startled voice: 'What's wrong with you? Calm yourself for God's sake and tell me!'

Waiting to hear no more, Plowart closed the windows quietly behind him and set off through the garden and along the path. Everything around seemed to be in movement. The sun was shining with such intensity the heat seemed to strike his face with increased force at every step forward.

As he walked his heart started to hammer, generating excitement and a sense of intoxicating purpose. By his watch he saw he had about ten minutes before the boat put out for Guernsey, and he wiped his face free of perspiration and lengthened his stride.

The dismaying thought that he might arrive at the harbour to find she was taking the boat back to England with her brothers clouded his excitement a little. If she went, he would have no chance to give her the deserts she deserved. She had hoped the spur would break and send him to destruction on the rocks, of course. But she had not taken into account his destiny!

It might have been an accident, despite her having lured him to the spot and sent him down, but the fact that she had not come to the house since proved otherwise. No, she wasn't going to incriminate herself! She had sent Jonathan, probably under some false pretext, to see if anyone was alive in the top room—he would be back in England when Plowart was missed.

His lips twisted sardonically as he walked. And what would happen after he was missed, with so many precedents of other tourists falling from the treacherous cliffs of Vachau? Nothing! That was the difference between the girl and him. While his killing was fraught with retributions for the rest of his life, hers would be an act of conscience—yes, probably the very phrase she would use herself. With all her pretence of squeamishness at his crime, she had tried to do the same thing herself. If she had failed, it was not her fault. And without even paying the moral price, she evaded the possibility of

discovery by making the cliffs his assassin. Who would believe a man would climb down the spur merely in response to a challenge? Yes, she had been clever like all these angels of goodness.

At the crest of the hill he stopped to wipe his face again and take off his jacket. The shirt was already stained with perspiration under his arms and clung to his chest like a damp rag. Halfway down, he saw the boat at the jetty and, among the figures loitering about on the sunlit concrete, the small shapes of the brothers and the taller one in the centre that was Claremont.

He kept his eyes fixed on them as he walked, seeing them more distinctly as the distance lessened. He was almost down to the level of the sea and about fifty yards from the small family group when a man joined them. It was unmistakably a police officer.

Plowart paused, then veered off the road and over the grass verge, striking a tangent that led him on to a cliff overhanging the harbour. He was out of sight within a few steps and, when he reached the top of the cliff, he advanced cautiously to the edge and looked down directly upon the jetty.

He saw the policeman laughing and talking with the boys, who were obviously besetting him with questions. He could also see that Claremont was regarding the officer with the quiet, serene expression of one completely at peace with herself.

After two or three minutes, the captain of the motor cruiser beckoned to them and the boys kissed Claremont and rushed up the gangplank. She made no attempt to follow them.

The cruiser put out with the boys craning over the boat rail shouting their farewells, while the girl and the policeman, standing side by side, waved back.

After the boat had disappeared around the shoulder of the island, the man and the girl left the harbour deep in conversation.

Plowart lay on his stomach and let them go, considering

what they would do. Doubtless she would tell the officer that he could be found with Lumas and would direct him to the house, giving no indication that the man he sought was dead.

In turn, Lumas would tell him he was somewhere down at the harbour—if the cripple chose to let down his barricade!

Plowart chuckled. The unfortunate policeman was heading for a hot reception when he reached Lumas. Well, there was nothing to fear from an interrogation. However, the essential point was that the officer would have to spend the night on Vachau, and take the boat back to Guernsey in the afternoon. If he could avoid the fellow today, the interview could be restricted to a minimum.

This overnight stay posed an unexpected difficulty: would Claremont offer the policeman a room at the Seigniorie or would he stay at the Siren? If he stayed at the Seigniorie, the opportunity to talk would be too tempting for any woman, however taciturn. It was no use worrying; he'd check at the tavern later. . . .

He watched the sea shimmering into the distance, with the heavy, cloying weight of the sun on his back. After an hour or so he pulled off his shirt and lit a cigarette.

Necessary as it was, this interlude was proving more frustrating than he had anticipated, but it would not be long now before the fuss was over. When he got back he would reorganise the League into a fighting machine never before paralleled in British politics: a machine of centralised power that would bear him above all others to a supreme position that had not even been vouchsafed to Churchill during the war. Other men had arrived at comparable positions by the same method—Lenin, Hitler, Mao-tse-tung. In a democracy, of course, one would have to compromise to begin with, but under the blows of successive state crises, the efficiency of single-handed power would soon prove more attractive than parliamentary ditherings!

'It's only a case of anticipating the *Zeitgeist*,' he told himself. 'One man sees what it's to be before all the others. Through

the years he works at producing the first spark. When he has it, he nurtures it to a bonfire, then a conflagration aimed at the petroleum of popularity. That's the time! But before the eulogies and the supreme offices it's patience that counts! With that, everything I want is coming—and without it, there's nothing!

He lay on the grass lazily turning over from his belly to his back and from his back to his belly until his whole body was throbbing with heat and the sun had gone down.

He stayed for a while in the darkness, occasionally following faint lights along the rim of the horizon where ships were beginning and ending their Atlantic crossings, but finally he got to his feet and pulled on his shirt.

Now that he had decided to re-appear in the life of the island, he moved quickly. He found his way easily back on to the road from the harbour and walked swiftly to the top of the hill.

Within a few minutes he came to the lighted balcony of the Siren.

Inside, the drinking-room was full of islanders who, although they went on with their talking and drinking, looked away pointedly when he came into the light.

This did not perturb him greatly and he crossed to the bar and rapped on the counter with a half-crown piece. 'A pint of brown ale, please.'

The landlord served the drink and said: 'I was expecting you to come in for the news this morning, Sir.'

'I overslept', Plowart said shortly. 'I might come in tomorrow.'

While he was taking a deep draught from his glass, the man leaned over the counter and said confidentially: 'There's a police officer looking for you, Sir. He's been in three times during the last couple of hours.'

'Have I done anything I shouldn't?' He emptied the glass and passed it across for another pint.

'He was telling me a friend of yours in London has had a

bad accident. It seems he's come all the way from Guernsey to break the news.'

'Damnation! I hope it's nothing serious. I must say you've got considerate police in these islands!'

The landlord laughed and said jocularly: 'Just like anywhere else, I'd say!' Then he dismissed the subject and, watching the last of the second pint disappearing down Plowart's throat, he said: 'You've got a thirst there, Sir!'

Plowart was brief. 'A day in the sun.'

He pulled out his handkerchief and dried his mouth. 'This policeman of yours. Any idea where he went?'

Miss Claremont asked him over to the Seigniory. She wanted a talk with him. He's booked a room here for the night so he ought to be back soon. Would you like to wait on when I close, Sir?'

'No, thanks. I think I'll go over to the Seigniory and find out what's happened.'

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the bar as he turned to go. His flesh was crimson and where the skin met the hairline it was beginning to scale.

He forced himself to appear unconcerned as he quit the place, but when an accordion was suddenly inflated on the balcony, it made him jump.

Once clear of the tavern he quickened his pace, the accordion's squeezing of 'Over the Sea to Skye' growing fainter behind him.

What was she saying?

For the first time fear nagged him and he wondered whether he had been right to think she could hold her peace any more than other women.

But what could she say? Could she say she had killed him because she thought he was a murderer? No, not her! It would mean disgrace and scandal for the whole family and island, and that would be her first concern as with all these *ancien régime* families.

He reached the gates of the Seigniory out of breath and was

half-afraid they would be locked at nights, particularly now she was alone. But the iron bars swung open as he pushed against them, and he entered the grounds silently.

He kept off the drive, preferring the softness of the grass, and advanced on the house with short runs from tree to tree, aiming for the lighted windows of the room where he had twice taken tea with the girl. When he reached them, he drew up against the wall and stealthily looked inside.

Claremont and the police officer were facing each other at the far end of the room with their faces in profile to him. From what Plowart could see of him, the man was in his early thirties, with a thin face and sandy, sparse hair.

Plowart strained to catch some words of their conversation, but the windows were closed and he could make out nothing beyond the faint murmur of their voices.

He watched their faces closely in the hope of gathering a clue, and when they both suddenly laughed he drew back against the bricks with a sigh of relief. Nothing mortally serious was being discussed, anyhow!

He waited for two hours, contenting himself with infrequent glances inside.

He was watching the moon over the top of the trees when the door opened ten feet away and their voices exchanged clear good nights before it closed again.

The officer's voice, he noticed, was touched by a slight rustic accent that did not sound in the least formidable. The man looked good-natured enough and his voice said he was slow and methodical.

Plowart watched him come within two yards of where he was concealed and then disappear up the drive. He did not move until he heard the gates close, and almost instantly the block of light falling in front of him was extinguished.

He waited to see which room would light up next, but seeing nothing, he made a quick detour around the house and found the lighted room was above a low-roofed outbuilding.

It was not difficult to climb and he had just reached the

window sill when this light went out also. The window was side-hinged and, gently pushing it inwards, Plowart swung his legs over and entered the room noiselessly.

He groped about and his left hand identified a sink and taps, worked its way further along the wall and found the light switch. He flicked it up and down swiftly, just long enough to identify this as the bathroom.

With the light out behind him, he opened the door on to a darkened corridor.

At the far end he saw a ribbon of light under a door and headed for it.

Outside, he paused momentarily with his ear against the panels before reaching out cautiously and turning the handle softly.

He flung the door open and went in.

Claremont was in bed and, just as he entered, she was extending her hand to turn off the bed-lamp.

For a moment there was only silence as their eyes met and he recorded again this eerie serenity of hers that had a stellar chill.

She said nothing, merely watching him with her hand on the lamp. To his fury his breath was sounding in loud gasps, like a frightened child. 'You see!' he shouted. 'Far from dead!'

She nodded slowly. 'It seems you do have a destiny, Plowart', she said. Her arm, bare to the shoulder, was long and very white; the sheets hid the rest of her. Seeing the direction of his eyes, she smiled faintly and drew the arm under the sheets. 'Perhaps we'd better leave the light on', she said.

Plowart walked over to the bed and looked down at her with an unblinking stare. 'You tried to kill me, didn't you? You thought that was the answer to your question of conscience.'

'Did I?' she asked, gazing up at him steadily and showing none of the fear he had expected her to show. 'Are you sure I tried to kill you, Plowart?'

'Yes, I'm sure', he retorted, determined not to be sidetracked with counter-questions. 'I've come here to settle the debt.'

'More violence? Haven't you done enough?' she asked impatiently. 'What do you intend to do—kill me?'

'No', Plowart said, smiling. 'I don't intend to kill you.' Lying in bed she was in a helpless position, unable to resist him whatever he chose to do, and the outline of her body under the bedclothes took on a sudden meaning as his eyes travelled along it. His glance settled on her silken underclothes, casually thrown across a stool at the bottom of her bed, and saw in them a sexual provocativeness that stirred him to excitement. Simultaneously his mind began to revive the various physical details that he had seen of her.

He recollected the high breasts under her dress when she had poured tea for him, and tonight it had been the slender whiteness of her arm.

Her body, he knew, must be as white and as soft as the silk with which she covered it.

This thought came with the inner explosion of a revelation, and he looked back on her face with an expression of hunger.

But her eyes halted him. They were steady and clear, disconcerting him with the knowledge that they had already read his intention before he had voiced it or made a move.

She said softly: 'Poor Plowart. Do you think that raping me would serve your ends? What satisfaction is there in that? While my body is hidden it seems alluring and worth your pawing, but when it's revealed. . . .'

'Yes?' he questioned, staring at her with the excitement flooding him.

'When it is revealed, it is nothing!' As she spoke she threw back the bedclothes and stood up, naked. 'Its beauty and magnetism aren't real, Plowart. It's all in the imagination! Now tell me frankly, would you want to seduce or rape me at this moment?'

Caught at its crest, the excitement turned icy, numbing his heart; he looked at her aghast, aching but not desiring.

Seeing her body and its beauty he was unable to reconcile it to his lust. As she turned slowly and deliberately before him, its cleanliness and liveness were without any sexual significance whatever.

She stopped moving and said gravely: 'You see! It's no use, is it?'

'No,' he said, 'It's no use'.

She went back to bed and with the sheets up to her chin looked at him with a flash of amusement. 'Has it been too much of a shock?' she asked.

'I was right,' Plowart said, triumphantly, 'You do have power!'

'You're quite wrong if you take this as an illustration of it,' Claremont said. 'Every woman knows this secret, but they don't choose to use it or men would have to turn to other things. That amounts to a mortal threat to procreation. You see, while a woman is synonymous with concealment and mystery she's desirable to men. The moment she strips herself the reality is an insult beside the paintings of the imagination. It's the reason men detest wantons; they're too honest to be seductive. By showing you what little I am—beauty or no beauty—I failed you. You can call it a simple lesson in psychology!'

He shook his head violently. 'No! It's nothing to do with that. Do you think I want a lecture on women? I don't care about their trivial tricks or their lack of them. I don't even care if sex is merely a case of imagination; that's another matter. I'm not concerned with illusions or delusions. What matters to me *is* that my own mind can be suddenly blocked and turned from its course. You are the only person who has done it. It's an issue of self-mastery and nothing else! If I want a woman, I should have her! If I think a man should die, he must! I won't attempt to explain the thinking—it's the way my mind works. What you did just now made me weak

while you were strong. I call that power in any language! You say all women have it, but I've never seen it before!

He spoke with such passion and sincerity that she felt guilty in gaining an advantage through his surprising innocence.

'Oh, come!' she said. 'Either I stopped you dead, or you raped me. That was the choice. I assure you that I don't show myself in the nude to everyone! And really, I had nothing to lose by showing you myself, because within three minutes you would have pulled back the bedclothes anyhow.'

'It's no use talking,' he said, obstinately. 'I was right when I first thought you had power. On the other hand, I was wrong to trust you with my life.'

She pulled up her knees under the bedclothes and clasped her arms around them, surveying him over the top.

'If someone offers you a dangerous challenge through which you gain new strength, murder is the last word for it!'

This piece of jesuitry made him laugh heartily for the first time that day. 'So that explains an attempted murder, does it? You plead that by sending a man to his death you were attempting to give him greater powers to deal with life? I'll know better than that if I'm tried for murder! Now, tell me the truth: was your motive really to give me new strength when you challenged me to go down to that spur of yours?'

'Of course not,' she said candidly. 'My motive was quite different: but that doesn't invalidate the result, does it?'

'What makes you think the result was good?'

'Well, do you deny it?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head mystified. 'I'm surer of my destiny now than I was before.'

'Then for heaven's sake stop these recriminations!' she told him, angrily.

Giving him no chance to reply, she changed the subject dextrously. 'Have you eaten today?'

He shook his head. 'I've plenty of tins in my room, but I haven't had time to open one yet.'

She threw back the bedclothes and pulled a silk dressing

gown around herself. 'Come along,' she said. 'Starvation is one kind of death that profits nobody!'

Following her down the stairs, he said dryly: 'You're a remarkable woman, Claremont. Yesterday you tried to kill me, and when I break into your house to return the compliment you concern yourself with whether I've eaten.'

She switched on the kitchen light and stepped to one side, letting him pass. 'But you didn't come to return the compliment, did you?'

She moved briskly about the kitchen and produced a round of cold beef, a jar of mixed pickles and gherkins, bread and butter. In a few minutes he had a pile of sandwiches in front of him and a cup of tea.

She contented herself with a glass of cold milk, watching him eat.

'I've never met anyone so indifferent to food,' she said. 'I can't imagine you worrying about such a banal function unless you have someone to drive you.'

He smiled idly. 'Bourcey used to do that.'

He said it without thinking, stopping abruptly. He had given her the name without considering the effect and he inwardly cursed himself.

'Would that be Sir Gregory Bourcey?'

He looked at her suspiciously, his amiability gone. 'How did you know?'

She looked at her milk composedly. 'The sergeant told me about him.'

Plowart shouted violently: 'He had no right to! These damned policemen always exceed their duty if they can get away with it. They can catch petty thieves, but when it comes to murderers. . . .'

'You forget we own Vachau,' she said curtly. 'Anyone who comes here on official business has to inform the Seigneur or Dame as a matter of procedure—or keep off!'

She paused, then said: 'Was it Bourcey whom you murdered?'

‘Say it was? What has it got to do with you? Stop pestering me with questions or I’ll go.’

For the first time he really wanted to destroy her, to throw her down and trample her into nothing. But she was the one person he needed.

She said musingly: ‘And he was the man who always saw to it that you never went without food. . . . You kill close to you, Plowart.’

‘What else did he say?’ he asked, ignoring the shaft.

‘Just that he wants a statement from you. It’s all quite innocuous, you know! As it happens, we talked more of my father—who is an old friend of his.’

‘No doubt your father finds better company in Athens,’ Plowart said, morosely.

She folded her hands on the table, then said quietly: ‘What stops you killing me, Plowart? I’ve given you enough provocation, compared with Sir Gregory, who probably didn’t provoke you at all.’

‘Why should I kill you? You’re no obstacle. On the contrary, if you keep your promise I’ll find the power to accelerate!’

‘The difference between you and Bourcey is that he threatened everything I hope to build. He wanted nothing but glory, position and wealth; a self-seeker of the worst type riding to power on my back and making everything he touched corrupt. Killing him wasn’t murder; it was an act of faith. You think I enjoyed having him killed? The truth is that he left me no alternative.’

‘I see. Perhaps what you did wasn’t as senseless as it seems.’

‘But what about your promise?’

‘I shall keep it, Plowart,’ she said levelly. ‘But now I want to sleep. You’d better take the clothes you left with me.’

She left him for a moment and returned with a bulky brown parcel which she put under his arm before leading him firmly to the kitchen door.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ he said, as he stepped outside.

‘Yes. Good night!’

The last glimpse before the door closed was of her dressing gown half-opened to reveal one pointed breast.

He found himself on the side path with the outbuilding in front of him, and walked around to the front of the house and up the drive to the gates.

It was useless denying that the more he saw of the girl the more her power fascinated him. He had wanted her savagely when she was lying in the bed, but she had shorn the desire with her nudity.

Now, when it was too late, the sight of her bare breast had aroused all the fury of his desire. 'She's using me every time I'm with her, and I let her get away with it,' he exclaimed angrily to himself.

Plowart walked along the cliffs feeling his hunger mounting steadily as he re-pictured her body and imagined himself touching it. By the time he saw the house he had reached a climax of frustration that was ready to burst in any direction, given incitement.

Coming through the garden he saw the lamp still burning behind the french windows. He pulled at them tentatively and, finding them locked, tapped three times on the glass.

The signal was answered instantly by the sound of heavy objects being removed and the cripple stood aside to let him enter.

'He's still at bay, Plowart,' he said excitedly, as a first greeting.

Plowart entered the room without answering and Lumas quickly jammed the windows shut again and slid a heavy beam across them. This done, he pulled two armchairs across to reinforce the beam. He worked with an absorbed, childlike efficiency.

'You can go to bed now,' Plowart informed him. 'I was kept longer than I expected.'

'Bed?' the other queried, grinning: 'I'm not so simple! It's what he wants me to do, but he's going to be very disappointed by the time morning comes!' He chuckled reminiscently. 'I've put out the lamp a couple of times and

waited in the dark. That's when he comes prowling past, trying to prise open the windows. He's an artful one all right!

'Has anyone else been here? I was told at the Siren that a police officer has come to see me from Guernsey.'

'I told him to meet you at the tavern. I thought it might be another trick to get inside.'

Plowart shrugged lightly. 'That's just as well. I'll go down in the morning and have a word with him.'

Lumas bent his head as though listening to some noise beyond the room, and looking abstractedly at Plowart said: 'What's the trouble?'

'A bereavement.'

The cripple was not really listening, however. His face was a study of concentration on the sound in the garden. Plowart thought this preoccupation natural under the circumstances and left him.

In the hall he was intercepted by Anne Lumas, who was fully dressed and seemed to have been waiting up to speak to him.

'What have you said to him?' she cried, clutching his sleeve in the darkness.

Plowart knocked her hand away irritably. 'What are you talking about?' he asked. 'Said to whom?'

'You've said something to Christopher that has changed him into another man!' she replied fiercely. Then, lowering her voice so that her words would not carry to her husband in the drawing-room, she went on: 'You've turned him into a lunatic!'

Indifferent as to whether he was overheard or not, Plowart answered furiously: 'I have? Why, Madam, most people would blame you for that! How long have you cuckolded him, now? Six years, is it? There's your husband waiting up all night to keep this lover of yours out of the house, and you tell a guest the responsibility for your husband's madness is his! Your logic is farcical, Mrs Lumas! Get out of my way!'

He forced past her as he spoke and ascended the stairs heavily.

Eight

Plowart walked over to the Siren at ten o'clock the next morning. The landlord was sprawled in a deckchair in front of the white balcony, reading a newspaper. 'Good morning, Sir!' he called. 'The chap from Guernsey is having breakfast in the parlour. He's expecting you.'

He went inside and found the police officer eating bacon and eggs. He had a teapot and a couple of cups set out, with the tea still waiting to be poured. Like the landlord, he was immersed in a newspaper which he had folded in a long wedge against the milk jug.

Plowart approached him smilingly: 'Hello! I believe you want a word with me? That's the standard police phraseology, I think. My name is Plowart.'

The police officer looked up, a slightly satirical expression on his face. 'Quite right, Mr Plowart. As a matter of fact I've been trying to speak to you from the moment I landed yesterday afternoon. I don't know how you've managed to evade me for so long.'

'Oh, come! Hardly "evade". I was merely basking in the sun on an outlying point. The essence of a holiday from London is the re-discovery of solitude. I plead guilty to it every time.'

'The wrong word, then,' the other said. 'But let me introduce myself: Sergeant Purchamp of the Island Police Force. Won't you join me at breakfast?'

'I don't think so, thanks. Too early in the morning for me. You go ahead and I'll watch you.'

The policeman looked disappointed. 'Another lonely meal, then! Well, one gets used to it, I suppose. At least you'll share a pot of tea with me?'

Plowart laughed. 'I should enjoy some.'

Purchamp poured the tea conscientiously, making a ceremony of it. When he accepted his cup, Plowart said: 'It's nice to enjoy human company again.'

The Sergeant broke a fresh roll into fragments and knifed butter on to a piece. 'You're thinking of that landlord of yours? I had a shouting match with him when I went to see you yesterday. He seems to think everyone is part of a conspiracy against him. I had to yell every word through a pair of french windows before he understood what I was after. He wouldn't open up at any price.' He put the bread into his mouth and munched reflectively. 'When you're alone on an island like this it's easy to develop a persecution complex.'

'His is a strange story,' Plowart commented lightly. 'Now what do you want from me, Sergeant?'

Purchamp swallowed his bread guiltily. 'It's with regard to the murder of Sir Gregory Bourcey. He was a close friend of yours, I believe?'

'Bourcey?' Plowart sounded astonished, his cup poised to his lips.

'That's right, Sir. You came to this tavern and heard his death announced by the B.B.C. the day before yesterday, I hear.'

'So I did,' Plowart agreed, hoping his show of astonishment would be attributed to another cause. 'But what has it to do with me?'

'I couldn't say, Sir! We simply had a request from the mainland asking for someone to pop over here with a few questions for you. Just to assist the investigations in London, you understand. As a matter of fact, all we want is a straightforward statement about such things as whether Sir Gregory had any enemies. I'm afraid politics are beyond me, so you'll have to lead a simpleton by the hand.'

Throughout this conversation his satirical expression had not changed, and Plowart wondered whether it was reserved for this particular occasion or was just a meaningless mannerism.

'No, Bourcey had no enemies. At least, none that I knew about. Although naturally, he had a number of political opponents.'

'But none who wanted to hit him with a hatchet?' asked the other dryly.

Plowart shook his head. 'Murder and politics don't run together. Not since Cromwell's time, anyhow.'

'So Sir Gregory's death takes us back to him, eh? A great man, Cromwell!'

'I'm one of his admirers myself,' Plowart said. 'But do you think it's a political murder?'

Purchamp shrugged: 'I'm in the dark, Mr Plowart. This is all I've got to work from.'

He brought up a pile of newspapers from the chair beside him and passed them over to Plowart. The murder occupied the front pages of all of them, with lurid headlines and blurred photographs of the dead man taken at various public functions. More photographs showed the Hampstead house, with the usual arrows and white dotted lines superimposed to indicate the ground floor window that had been forced by the murderers.

Plowart read one or two of the stories and found that every report included some reference to himself. The fact that the dead man's closest friend was holidaying out of England at the time of the tragedy was also commented upon.

When he had finished, Plowart looked up to meet the sergeant's eyes, which were resting on him with a judicial air. 'Tragic!' he said, returning the papers. 'And so utterly pointless. I can't imagine who could have done it. Would it have been burglars?'

The sergeant shrugged. 'Too early to tell. All they can do at Scotland Yard is narrow down their investigations to the minimum number of suspects.'

'Then let me give you a full statement; I hope it will help to bring the guilty to justice,' Plowart said.

'Oh, yes. Quite.' Purchamp sounded non-committal. He

took a notebook from the breast pocket of his jacket and, releasing the spring of a ball pen, wrote at the top of a page Plowart's name, the date and the place. When he had completed these preliminaries he looked up and said: 'Will you start from the beginning, Sir?'

Plowart told him of the events that had decided the formation of the New Britain League and how he and Bourcey had struck up a friendship from the outset and remained inseparable from that time on. He explained how the hard campaigning entailed in a by-election had driven him to take a holiday away from London, and of the circumstances of his last meeting with Bourcey before he had taken the train down to Southampton. He had repeated it to himself so often that he married the facts and the half-truths with effortless conviction.

When he had finished, Purchamp sighed and tucked away his notebook.

'It must have come as a hard shock to you so early in the morning.' His face was impassive.

'Yes, it did. It ruined the whole day for me.'

'So I imagined. It was quite a coincidence that you went to hear the news and found your friend's tragedy included.'

'Not such a coincidence,' Plowart said. 'I listen to the news every morning. Every politician has to, particularly on the eve of an election.'

Purchamp murmured: 'Yes, of course. How stupid of me! I warned you I was a simpleton where politics are concerned. That was why you raised such a fuss when your radio was broken while you were on Guernsey, I suppose?'

'Your investigations are exceeding your terms of reference, Sergeant,' Plowart said, angrily.

The police officer looked at him with mild surprise. 'The café proprietor came in to see us, Mr Plowart; we only listened. I'm surprised you feel any embarrassment at official interest in your activities, Sir. You have nothing to fear, surely?'

'I disagree with you. There is nothing more fearful than

the irrelevance of your methods! While you waste valuable time analysing my reasons for listening to radio broadcasts, these murderers are enjoying themselves in peace. If you stand as a sample of police work, it's the guilty who should have no fears!

Purchamp broke into laughter. 'Bravo! What a storm I called down with an innocent word! I can see you'll be a formidable champion at the hustings with that gift of irony. Yes—indeed!'

He leaned over and lifted the lid of the teapot. 'Ah!' he exclaimed with satisfaction, 'Enough for another cup!' He poured the last of the tea into their cups and added milk and sugar with enthusiasm.

Plowart touched the cup to his lips and, finding the brew tepid and too strong, returned it to the table. The man was certainly an adept at arousing the temper of those he interviewed; he would have to be very careful. It was clear, too, that Purchamp had not wasted his time either on Guernsey or on Vachau. More than likely he had already gathered impressions from Quiller and his friends, the landlord here, as well as from Duncan, the café proprietor. But let him find out what he liked, it would all be irrelevant to a murder in London.

Purchamp said solicitously: 'Is it too cold for you? Shall we have some hot water in that cup, Sir?'

'No thanks. I've had all the tea I want.'

'Well, now, what was it I wanted to ask you. . . ? Ah, yes. Is Sir Gregory's death likely to affect the results of the by-election?'

'More than likely. He took care of the thousand and one details that make all the difference in this sort of thing.'

'Just as I supposed. But do you think you'll actually lose the seat because he's dead?'

'No, of course not!' Plowart answered, exasperated by the man's persistence.

'Then he won't vitally affect the contest. That's exactly what I was trying to establish.'

'I really fail to see what significance all this has,' Plowart said.

'In this sort of business one always starts by weighing up the profit and loss of a death, Sir.' The police officer drew small circular diagrams on the tablecloth with his teaspoon. The circles eventually became ovals with a straight line running from the top of them.

'Do you usually amuse yourself by drawing nooses when you're questioning friends and relatives of murder victims, Sergeant?'

Purchamp dropped the teaspoon and smiled deprecatingly. 'I wasn't aware I was drawing nooses, Sir. I'm afraid you're distraught with the responsibilities placed on your shoulders by Sir Gregory's death.'

'What responsibilities? I don't know what you mean.'

'Well, now he's dead you are the sole leader of the New Britain League, I believe? With the speed you're enlisting new members you may be the Prime Minister soon.' His satirical smile reappeared. 'That's a lot of responsibility for any man, Mr Plowart.'

'For a member of the Island Police Force you're remarkably well-informed, Purchamp,' Plowart said. 'There appears to be more to that message from Scotland Yard than you'd have me think!'

'Blame the newspapers, Sir,' Purchamp replied, sipping his tea and refusing to take offence. 'We're all ardent readers of the Press in the Force, and we learn more of our business in the crime columns than from the Police Gazette! No, don't blame the Yard for my academic curiosity. Officially, I'm only here to take a statement.'

'Which you've already taken, Sergeant,' Plowart retorted. 'Is there anything more I can contribute either to the statement or your curiosity?'

Purchamp shook his head resignedly. 'You've given me all the co-operation I could expect, Sir,' he said. 'As far as I'm concerned, you are free to go back to your solitude.'

‘Good. Since you’ve finished your business on Vachau I shall see you off on the afternoon boat,’ Plowart said, watching the officer’s face attentively.

The Sergeant stirred uncomfortably and replied: ‘Oh, there’s no need to go to that trouble, Sir. I’m capable of getting on it alone, and I wouldn’t think of putting you to any trouble.’

There was some trickery going on, then! Plowart said succinctly: ‘It will be a pleasure to see you off, Sergeant. Good morning!’

He went out into the clean air and walked back to the house with his head bent. He knew how this fellow’s mind was working. Although he had been asked to procure a simple statement concerning the last time Plowart had seen Bourcey and any clues relating to enemies he had made, this wasn’t sufficient for an ambitious policeman. All the publicity that the Press had given to the murder had persuaded him that the case offered meteoric promotion, even a transfer to New Scotland Yard, if he could solve it himself.

‘But since I’m the only man he can lay his hands on, he’s going to try to involve me whether I’m guilty or not!’

The question was: what would he do about it when he returned to Guernsey? Would he pass on to Scotland Yard such points as Plowart listening to the news on the very day the murder was announced? But what did that constitute in itself? Purchamp had twice shown his shrewdness in deducing that Bourcey’s murder would not damage the results of the polling and also that his death would actually leave Plowart as sole leader of the League. The first point—that he would not lose by Bourcey’s death, and the second, that the death was actually advantageous to him. But these points on their own would not be sufficient to convince a jury accustomed to such orthodox motives as lust and robbery.

But this was ridiculous! There was a great difference between an upstart sergeant and a Crown prosecution. Unless the police had a virtually unchallengeable case to present in court they would do nothing. Popular prejudice against law

and order made them too vulnerable a target to do anything but step warily.

No, at worst, an ambitious sergeant like Purchamp could only be an inconvenience.

Plowart's mind travelled back to Purchamp's reluctance to be seen off the Island. What was the reason for that? As soon as he had suggested it, the policeman had drawn back in a most suspicious manner. If he intended to stay, what was he planning?

Plowart's eyes drifted off the path in front of him and down to the sea on his right where gulls whirled over the water. Was it to be a battle of nerves?

But if that was what he intended, why was he so furtive about staying? To heighten the effect when he revealed himself, perhaps? The thunderclap confrontation? It was the kind of psychological trick the police specialised in. Plowart smiled grimly, considering it. The tactic depended for its success on the supposition that the guilty suffered from pangs of conscience. Well, he didn't suffer from his conscience, God knew!

The only difficulties Bourcey's death had created were the outcome of the burglary motive being bungled. Why the blazes hadn't they taken the valuables as he had instructed! But even if the robbery motive proved useless, there were a thousand reasons why a man could be hatched to death, surely! Perhaps the indefatigable police might even succeed in finding that Bourcey had been living with someone else's wife. That would be ironical!

He was smiling twistedly at the thought of this posthumous revelation as he tapped on the french windows. There was no answer to the taps and, after waiting a few minutes with no sign of Lumas, Plowart angrily repeated the tattoo at regular intervals until the cripple appeared behind the glass rubbing his eyes tiredly. Seeing it was Plowart, he threw aside the barricade and opened the windows.

'Welcome to the fort, Plowart!' he chuckled. 'We're leading a regular garrison life now, eh?'

Plowart watched him restoring the defences and said impatiently: 'Do I have to wait for you to wake up every time I want to come in? You ought to sleep at nights and stay awake in the day like everyone else. You're taking this business too far.'

'It's only for a fortnight,' Lumas whined, looking over his shoulder as he pulled an armchair across the windows. 'You'll have to have patience, that's all. I didn't think you'd be back for hours.' He tittered: 'I half-expected to see you with handcuffs around your wrists!'

He completed his fortifications and hobbled down the room back to his chair. 'As for sleeping at nights, that's when our friend comes visiting! Do you want me to give him a key to the house as well?' He shook his head solemnly. 'No, Plowart. I'll sleep when there's less chance of a call from him.'

'You're right, of course,' Plowart acknowledged. 'It's becoming a cursed nuisance, that's all. I suppose in a few days he'll be discouraged and go back to Guernsey.'

'Why don't you stay up with me tonight, Plowart? We'll keep each other company and talk the dark away. I've been waiting for a long talk with you from the day you came.' Lumas leaned forward eagerly and said, cajolingly: 'You won't regret a little intimate conversation, I promise you.'

'I shall look forward to it,' Plowart told him.

His acquiescence delighted the cripple. 'Tonight?' he asked.

Plowart shook his head. 'No, perhaps tomorrow.' As he left the room he added: 'There's plenty of time.'

He paused in the hall but, seeing no light from the kitchen, shrugged and went on up to his room. It was no concern of his what the woman did with herself!

Going up the ladder to the attic he felt drained of purpose, the inevitable aftermath of meeting people lacking life. He had noticed that whenever he talked with Lumas he invariably felt the need for a reaffirmation of life; it was this that impelled him to take up his battered biography of Lenin and settle down to the tenacious struggle of a man with a superabundance of

both life and vision. The effect of the words was so powerful that Vachau soon became irrelevant and unreal, and the buildings and streets of Munich, where the bearded visionary had edited his small political newspaper, took its place. It had the effect of a drug, lifting him above all the pettifogging irritations of normal men and women and infusing in him the same kind of dedication to an ideal future.

He read steadily for about an hour until a succession of creaks sounded from the landing below. He frowned and put down the book. The sounds were of someone walking stealthily but unable to prevent the floor giving.

Plowart got to his feet cautiously and crossed to the top of the ladder. As the footsteps retreated he lowered himself silently to the landing. He was just in time to see the door at the end of the corridor closing upon Lachanell. So, despite the cripple's efforts, he was in again!

Plowart considered the situation briefly, then advanced down the corridor, keeping close to the wall to avoid loose boards.

When he was only six feet away from the door, a key grated in the lock. The scrape of iron brought him to a standstill, but after a few moments he advanced again, sure that the precaution had been taken against the possible arrival of Lumas.

A few more steps brought him to the panels of the door itself. Now he could hear their voices plainly and distinguish every word they spoke. The first words were sufficient to arouse all his contempt. Lachanell was saying: 'My dearest, sweet one. Don't you see it's useless? Change your mind, for God's sake, and leave this place!'

The woman's voice replied, more softly: 'He becomes more pitiful and helpless every time you come. You don't see him every day or you wouldn't ask me.'

'Of course, he does! The old frog's acting! Can't you see it? He's living off your pity, and he's been doing it for so long it's become a part of him. Let him die if he wants to! What does he matter to us or to anyone else?'

'No, please!'

A silence fell after her whispered plea, and the bed creaked heavily. They were probably locked in a passionate embrace, with the man arguing his case with caresses.

The woman's voice became laboured; Plowart could hear its heaviness even through the panels. 'No, it's no use. I can't . . . I simply can't leave! This man Plowart has changed him completely; he's half demented. It would be fatal to leave him now.'

Lachanell said furiously: 'What about me? I've waited in the cold all night. Do you want me to walk the garden like a fool, with the house locked, barred and bolted against me? If Lumas is going to act like this every time I try to see you, we might just as well be dead! You can't keep opening a window for me. When he finds out he'll bolt the kitchen, and then what?'

After a long silence, the woman said: 'The window of the third room down the passage has no glass. Christopher hasn't boarded it because he's sure even you can't climb thirty feet . . .'

'Nor can I!' His voice was surly. .

'But there's an iron grapple in the tool-room and any amount of rope we can knot it to. All you need do is bury it under the window-sill and use the rope as a ladder. So long as you pull it up after you, no one will be any the wiser.'

Lachanell said approvingly: 'Clever girl! But isn't the door of the room kept locked?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But Christopher keeps the key, with thirty or forty others, in his jacket. If I wait until he's drunk or asleep, I can take it without him missing it.'

Lachanell laughed quietly, but the sound was stifled, as if she had covered his mouth with her hand. When she released him the tomato-grower exclaimed: 'What a joke! He's happy so long as his precious windows are shut, but I can get in all the same.'

'But we must be wary of Plowart,' she warned him. 'He's more dangerous than you think.'

Lachanell said amiably: 'Let me take care of Mr Plowart if he interferes again. The first time we met he was half dead and, like a fool, I took pity on him. I shan't make the same mistake again, I can tell you.'

The conversation became more intimate and irrelevant, and Plowart retreated noiselessly along the corridor.

Back in his room he prepared to go out to meet Purchamp, his mind full of the conversation he had just overheard.

He combed his hair, watching his reflection in the mirror detachedly. If he allowed Lachanell to gain free access into the house with the grapnel, there was plainly trouble ahead.

But he decided not to tell Lumas what he knew until the police officer was off the island. He couldn't afford to give Purchamp an opportunity to prolong his stay.

The drawing-room was empty when he went downstairs and he had to let himself out. There was no point in calling the cripple to replace the barricades and he left the windows open behind him.

After five minutes of hard walking he reached the harbour with two minutes to spare before the boat was due to leave, but there were none of the usual preparations for departure. He walked over to the edge of the jetty and hailed the captain, leaning against the steering wheel in his cabin. 'Aren't you putting off soon?' he shouted.

The captain looked across and shrugged philosophically. 'Supposed to, according to schedule, but our roving policeman has ordered me to wait half-an-hour until he gets back from the Siren. He left something behind, he said.'

'I'll stroll up and meet him along the way.'

As he turned to retrace his steps the captain said: 'I brought a letter with a London postmark for you. The Sergeant said he'd leave it with the landlord.'

Plowart nodded, his face darkening. 'Thanks, I'll get it from him.'

He lengthened his stride against the gradient of the hill, his eyes searching for Purchamp. There wasn't much chance of

meeting him so soon; he was probably still busy reading the letter in his room at the tavern. He cursed himself savagely for forgetting the possibility of letters coming for him on the boat. Obviously that would be the first question Purchamp would ask the skipper the moment the boat put in. The possibility of any letter being incriminating was remote, but there was always the chance. After the bungling of Bourcey's assassination an explanation was likely. His temper was well-known, and the chance of making excuses by post rather than meeting him face to face was not one that would be passed easily by the imbeciles he had been fool enough to entrust with the job.

By the time he reached the Siren he was balanced between white rage and apprehension. The landlord looked at him, astonished, when he burst into the parlour and demanded where Purchamp could be found. When he was told, he ran up the stairs two at a time, seized the handle of the second door and flung it open. He expected to catch the police officer in the act of reading his letter, or at least skilfully sealing down the envelope flap.

Purchamp was doing neither of these things, however. He was reclining in an armchair, smoking, without the slightest vestige of guilt on his face. Chagrined, Plowart came to a stop and looked about the room. There was no sign of paste, glue or paperknives, but the fellow was obviously too astute to leave any such betraying items in view.

'You've got a letter of mine', Plowart said curtly. 'Let's have it.'

Purchamp nodded placidly. 'So I have. I nearly forgot it!' He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a long envelope, which he passed across.

Plowart took it and turned it over; there was no sign of the flap having been lifted.

'Is it that valuable, Sir?' Purchamp puffed on his pipe, his blue eyes clear and simple.

Plowart ignored him and tore open the envelope. The letter

was in five pages of closely-spaced handwriting. He scanned it quickly and the few words he deciphered in that swift glance made him close his eyes at the nearness of his escape and how close this sergeant had come to changing history.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and smiled. 'Just another bill, Sergeant!'

Purchamp nodded sympathetically and got to his feet. 'I think I'd better get back to the boat, or I'll be giving our boys in Guernsey a bad name. That skipper's very good at cursing us already, I'm told. We've had him a few times for running liquors over to the mainland, and he's not the forgiving type.'

'Then he and I have something in common, Sergeant,' Plowart said.

Purchamp took up his small attaché case and surveyed the room to see there was nothing he had forgotten, before turning to his visitor. 'The trouble with not forgiving is that it presents one with the problem of revenge, Sir. A supreme grievance warrants a supreme punishment, eh!'

'What are you getting at?'

'Nothing at all, Sir. I was merely commenting on the psychology of it. Would you like to walk down to the harbour with me, and we can chat on the way?'

'No, I'll wish you goodbye here, Sergeant.'

Plowart stood at the tavern door, on the point of raising his hand in a cold salute, when the other took his arm persuasively.

'No,' he said quietly, 'I'd rather you didn't go yet. I want to pose an interesting question to you; surely you can walk part of the way with me?'

Plowart regarded him steadily for a moment and then acquiesced. 'What's the question?'

'Do you believe in murder? As a sound premiss of logic, I mean?'

Plowart stopped in his stride and saw the other was serious. So the man could be direct, when he cared! 'The question's too general,' he said, matching his steps with those of the police

officer. 'We all believe in it in one form or another. In war, it's the essence of patriotism. In the church, it's the essence of martyrdom. But no, I don't believe in murder for its own sake. I take it in another way altogether.'

The officer was out of his depth now. Plowart smiled, enjoying his perplexity.

'Tell me, Sergeant, do you know anything of the doctrine of containment? No, I suppose you wouldn't. Very simply it means that by listening to Beethoven one is filled by him, and being filled by him—containing him—one *becomes* Beethoven. Unless this act of containment can be effected, Beethoven is gibberish. Which, of course, is exactly what he is to most people anyway. Another example is Hamlet's stepfather. He murdered the Prince's father, but yet—although hating him with all the fervour of his being—Hamlet could not stab him while the villain was bent in prayer before the Holy Cross. At that moment of praying, the stepfather had relinquished his identity and become the Holy Container of the Redeemer. His other personality had gone until he took his leave of the Crucifix.'

'An ifteresting theological point,' Purchamp answered, 'But I can't see the relevance.'

'You asked me if I believe in murder. Well, I do not! The taking of life is a completely unjustifiable conclusion to any system of logic. What I do endorse is that if a man is the container of a singularly great belief and any person threatens its realisation or delays its fruition in any way, then the container is fully justified in abolishing that obstruction. Not in his own name, but in the name of what he contains.'

They had reached the boat now. Catching sight of them, the crew began to stand up and stretch from their sprawling positions on the deck. Purchamp stopped at the gangplank, deliberately ignoring their eagerness to get away, and said ingenuously: 'Well, I haven't understood a word you've said, Sir, so I'm no better off for my question. Let me ask you another. Would you agree that this container of yours was a

social evil? I mean an evil in the sense of killing men in the name of an ideal.'

'You make it impossible for me to agree, Sergeant,' Plowart said. 'Civilisation is the creation of those who believe more ardently than the average person. But wherever you find belief, you find violence, death and destruction. Fanaticism and blood-letting are both evils in a civic sense—but only because most people are incapable of containing any high ideals. In your office you're compelled to regard the person who kills as a murderer. Without that blindness you would be out of business. But in an historic sense, the arch-criminals are inevitably the arch-saints who set up the pillars that support the drapes of civilisation. You can't have a circus without a Big Top, and you can't have a Big Top without the centre-poles. The centre-poles of all our lives, yours and mine included, are capital crimes. The taking of life is the essential step to the giving of life.'

Purchamp shrugged apologetically. 'I'm a very simple man, Mr Plowart,' he said. 'Goodbye!'

Plowart grinned mirthlessly as the gangplank was pulled up after the police officer had boarded the boat.

He watched until the cruiser was out of sight, then turned and walked back up the hill. Poor Purchamp had thought to manœuvre a damning statement out of him for his little black book. Well, he had more than he needed; but it would take a patient court to accept that kind of argument as evidence in a hatchet affair!

If only the fellow had had a little more sense he would have opened the letter walking up the hill. But his chance was gone.

When he reached the house it was dusk and he wondered whether Lachanell had prepared the way of entry the woman had suggested. He ran his fingers along the bricks under the open window, but found nothing. He raised the height of his hand but again met with no success. At the third attempt, however, with his hand raised above him to its full extent he

located it. He chuckled and set a garden chair beneath. Standing upon it, he took the rope firmly between his hands and climbed to the window above. The room was in darkness, as he had expected. For a brief moment he wondered if Lachanell was already hiding there, but then realised it was unlikely. He would not leave the dangling rope to betray him.

The door was unlocked and opened immediately he turned the handle. Plowart left it ajar and went back to the window. Lachanell had sunk the grapnel into the inside sill as the woman had instructed him, and it took only a sideways wrench to disengage it. Swinging it loosely in his hand, Plowart hauled up the rope and wound it tightly around the flukes, sheathing them. Amused at what he was going to do, he walked loudly across the room and into the corridor, slamming and locking the door behind him. He was slipping the key into his pocket as Anne Lumas came hurrying out from her room, whispering sibilantly: 'What are you doing? You'll wake him up with all this noise.'

She had obviously mistaken him for Lachanell in the darkness.

Plowart said mockingly: 'Trust me, we shan't wake him, Mrs Lumas. That's why I came this way—to save him the trouble of opening the french windows.'

Recognising his voice, she recoiled. 'What are you doing here?' she cried, despairingly.

'Emptying your bag of tricks,' Plowart retorted. 'You can tell Lachanell I'll board up that window tomorrow. There'll be no way in for him anywhere when I've finished!'

As he climbed the steps to his room, she exclaimed wildly: 'You're inhuman! May God strike you for the unhappiness you bring!'

He reached his room without replying, his mind already elsewhere. Flinging the grapnel and rope on to the bed, he filled a kettle and put it on the range. As he waited for it to boil he unfolded the letter describing the end of Bourcey.

He read carefully, now he was alone, and the scene in Hampstead came to him in sombre colours as he followed the words.

Nine

He lowered the letter at last with a feeling that the whole of life was waiting breathlessly for him to make the next move. It was the feeling that a dowdy expatriot must have had after finishing each chapter of *Das Kapital*—deliberately walking the streets of Bloomsbury to reduce the excitement that threatened the coherence of the next chapter.

Previously Plowart had thrived on such dramatic episodes in the lives of men who had overturned nations, but now he had no need to look to others and live greatness by proxy. It was odd that, from this night on, every circumstance and detail of his existence was historic, was to be treasured and would be related by all who came in contact with him. The knowledge was enough to intensify his impatience with this island that had already served its purpose.

Now that Bourcey was dead there was no more time to be wasted. He had dissociated himself from the death as a political necessity and he had stayed where he was to make his statement to the local police. Now that he had been officially informed of the murder, it was natural he should return immediately, take over the League and continue his election campaign.

He sprawled on the bed and lit a cigarette from the candle. Yes, he'd pack and catch the afternoon boat, leaving all these wretched lives behind him without a thought. All of them, that was, except the girl. He would walk over to the Seignior in the morning and force her to keep her promise and tell him what he wanted. And then, farewell.

It would be pleasant to take her with him, but she wouldn't agree, of course. Well, perhaps she would be too much trouble

anyhow. Now she fascinated him, but in a few years when he was satiated with her body and knew the workings of her mind, he'd curse himself for his weakness . . .

At this moment of dismissing the possibility of having her as a comrade and mistress, a series of knocks fell on the french windows below.

Plowart listened intently, making no movement. In the silence that followed, a stone hit one of the windows of his room with a sharp crack that almost broke the glass.

He climbed off the bed scowling, imagining this was Lachanell, furious at finding himself locked out. He opened the window and shouted down: 'Keep quiet, you fool! Get a bed at the tavern!'

But it was not Lachanell. A clear voice, unmistakably Claremont's, called out: 'Plowart! I must speak to you!'

The chill of the night air against his open shirt made him shiver. 'Are you alone?'

'Yes, of course. Hurry up!'

'All right. Stay where you are, I'm coming down.'

He closed the window and pulled on his jacket. As he was about to descend the ladder, he looked back and saw the five sheets of the letter, that held the news of Bourcey's death, lying on the floor where he had thrown them. Cursing his carelessness, he stuffed them into his jacket pocket.

He went downstairs hurriedly. There had been a note of agitation in her voice that, together with the late hour of her call, warned him something had happened. He wondered why her knocking had not aroused Lumas, but when he entered the living-room he understood. Since he had barricaded the windows the cripple had relapsed into his old habits. He was snoring loudly with his head on the table and his fingers still gripping an overturned glass from which a puddle of wine had spilled.

After one contemptuous glance at him Plowart removed all the obstacles piled against the windows and went out on to the terrace. The girl was standing just beyond the circle of

light but she came forward to meet him. She was wearing a woolly coat that reached below her knees and had turned the collar of it up around her ears.

‘Claremont? What’s wrong?’

‘Sergeant Purchamp knows you’re concerned in that murder! He told me so tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ Plowart echoed. ‘He went back to Guernsey on the afternoon boat. I saw him off.’

‘I know, but he came back. Let’s walk to the end of the garden; Lumas might hear us here.’

After they had gone a few steps, she said: ‘He ordered the boat back when he was sure you’d left the harbour. He came over to the Seigniory and asked if I would let him have a room for a few days without anyone being told. Apparently he intercepted a letter of yours today but he heard you running up the stairs before he could open it. Although you stopped him reading it, your behaviour convinced him you were directly involved in the murder. He thinks if he can get into your room and see the letter, it will give him all the evidence he needs.’

Plowart grasped her arm fiercely. ‘Where is he now?’

‘Asleep at the Seigniory. I gather he’s going to hide somewhere in the garden here tomorrow until he sees you leave.’

She detached her arm from the painful grip of his fingers. ‘It’s all right,’ she said quietly. ‘He’s asleep. I promise you. I looked into his room before coming to warn you.’

‘Waking or sleeping, he’s wasting his time!’ Plowart answered, vindictively. He patted his jacket pocket and added: ‘That letter he wants is here. By the time he’s climbed out of bed it will be burned and scattered. I suspected he was up to some trickery when I saw him off on the boat, but I didn’t think he’d go to these lengths for his promotion.’

He thought for a few moments, then suddenly recalling her presence, said in a low voice: ‘Why do you bother to warn me? Purchamp is trying to do through the law what you tried to do on the cliffs. He only suspects my part in

Bourcey's murder, while you know it. Doesn't he serve your purpose?'

In a tone that matched his, she said: 'I can't bear to see anyone systematically trapped. Besides, if I really thought you could murder out of hand I should have no pity for you at all. I had none when I challenged you to climb down to the White Feather, but you changed my mind for me last night.'

'That was enterprising of me!' he said, laughing. 'Now I mustn't abuse your kindness by keeping you standing in the cold. The least I can do is to take you home.'

She tried to dissent but he waved aside her objections imperiously. 'No, I insist; and that's final. You walk on and I'll catch you up instantly. I must wake up the drunkard and tell him to re-erect his fortifications. He's so far gone he'd miss Judgment Day if I let him!'

'I'll wait for you at the end of the garden,' Claremont said.

He went back into the house and shook the cripple's shoulder vigorously. 'Wake up, you old sot!' he shouted. 'Lachanell's broken in!'

Lumas stirred uneasily and his eyes fluttered open, fixing themselves vacantly on Plowart's face. 'What? Where did you say?' He began to dribble as his eyes swept the room with gathering suspicion. Plowart laughed and clapped him on the back. 'I was joking. Fasten the windows while you've the chance. I'm going out.'

'That's right,' Lumas said stupidly. 'Keep the devil in the cold.'

Plowart went out again and set off through the garden to rejoin the girl. As he passed a laurel tree, a massive figure in a black raincoat stepped out from behind it. Giving Plowart no time to guard himself, the ambusher struck him in the face with such violence that Plowart was hurled upon his back. Almost insensible, he dragged himself to his knees, shook his head, and blindly tried to locate his assailant.

'You obstinate bastard!' Lachanell muttered. He took a

step forward and hit him in the face a second time. The blow, with all the big man's weight behind it, stretched Plowart out on the ground unconscious.

Lachanell stood over him, breathing heavily, then bent forward and pulled the letter from Plowart's jacket. He rubbed his knuckles: 'This settles the argument as to who takes the attic,' he exclaimed, triumphantly . . . 'Now let's get it under a light and read the juicy details.'

The girl had evidently heard the sound of Plowart falling, for he heard her crossing the garden towards them.

Lachanell, after a moment's reflection, merged into the darkness and disappeared around the back of the house, leaving Plowart alone on the ground.

Claremont drew in her breath sharply when she discovered him lying motionless. She leaned over him as he stirred with returning consciousness. Feeling his eyelashes flutter as she ran her hand over his face, she said anxiously: 'What happened? Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm all right. But just leave me alone for a moment.' He lay still, looking up at the sky, his head a beehive of pain and his face feeling ripped. Gradually the pain lessened and he was able to turn his head. 'Did you see which way he went?' he asked weakly.

She shook her head in the dark. 'Were you attacked? I heard you fall and thought you had tripped over something.'

'I did. Lachanell's love affair. This attack was his revenge, but he didn't stop to explain.'

'He had no right to attack you,' she said indignantly.

'It doesn't matter!' He spoke sharply, enraged with himself for not anticipating such an attack. Feeling her stiffen, he realised she had misunderstood his anger and touched her cheek lightly.

He said: 'I'm angry with myself, not you.'

Claremont relaxed and said softly: 'Can't I do anything to help?'

'You can give me a hand, if you like!'

He let her take most of his weight, her arm around his waist, and stood up painfully. His face had the numb stiffness of a carnival mask and every word he uttered hurt his lips, forcing him to speak slowly and deliberately. 'Come along, I'm supposed to be taking you home.'

'You'd better go to bed,' she said.

'No,' he said stubbornly. 'I said I'd see you home and I intend to.'

'All right, have it your own way.' As they took the cliff path she said sternly: 'Now don't fob me off again, Plowart. Why did Lachanell attack you?'

'He's suffering from an acute glandular disorder called lust, and thinks I'm stopping him from satisfying it. One fabricates all sorts of grievances in that condition, but an outsider shouldn't put stock on any of them.'

On the way to the Seigniorie he told her of the incidents leading to his assault. She was already acquainted with the main facts of Lachanell's infatuation with Anne Lumas. 'One cannot escape gossip about such matters on an island,' she remarked. When he told her of his own attempts to stop the affaire and help the cripple, she was impatient. 'You can't interfere in these issues, Plowart. Do you think you're capable of deciding the rights and wrongs of other people's affairs? Only God can claim that authority.'

'We are all gods,' Plowart retorted angrily. 'The moment we pass the responsibility of judgment on to someone else we cease to be human. These two men are on a see-saw; every time Lachanell touches ecstasy, Lumas drops into abasement. But Lumas' turn won't come until Lachanell has gone for good—and that won't happen for a long time! No, everything we see should arouse us to pass judgment as a plain duty of the living!'

She dismissed his anger with a shake of the head. 'There's a great difference between pity and judgment. I'm sorry for Lumas, but his life is a matter for himself alone. Would his wife go to another man if he had proved sufficient? No woman

would leave a man unless he had failed her in some way. 'Lachanell's just a libertine by the sound of him, and she's probably using him as much as he's using her, without any love at all. If the husband acted decisively, she would go back to him, I should think.'

'If he were any sort of a man he wouldn't take her back,' Plowart said brusquely. 'She's become contaminated like any woman who finds another lover.'

'What nonsense!' Claremont said scornfully. 'Contaminated with what? The other lover's superiority? You're quite wrong to think the body matters. Lumas hasn't been betrayed, so long as love doesn't enter into her liaison with Lachanell!'

Plowart laughed tersely, not in the least convinced, as they walked down the Seignior drive. 'More jesuitry,' he remarked, *sotto voce*. 'If you respected people less, you'd learn more about them!'

As she opened the door she stopped him from turning away. 'Don't go back straight away,' she said. 'Come in first and I'll give you something to warm you for the return walk. You've no overcoat and you'll find pneumonia is a more efficient destroyer than the police!'

He hesitated, then followed her in. He stumbled heavily on a divan in the hall before she had time to switch on the light.

She whispered a warning and led the way into the brightly lit kitchen. 'You don't want Sergeant Purchamp to join us, do you?' she laughed, turning to him.

Her expression changed swiftly to one of horror as she saw for the first time the condition of his bloodstained face under the electric light.

Leading him to the sink, she ran a sponge beneath the tap and gently washed away the congealing blood.

The damage was superficial, however. More painful and ugly than dangerous, it consisted of a gashed lip, a slight laceration above one eyebrow and extensive bruising of his right cheek and jaw.

Satisfied it was no more, she fixed a strip of adhesive tape over the eyebrow and stepped back: 'There!' she said. 'Now, if you'll just sit down for a moment, I'll get you something to eat.'

He watched her absorbed in the ritual of preparing a meal, but eventually became bored and asked her where Purchamp was sleeping. When she answered his question, he said: 'Do you mind if I steal up and have a look at him?'

'Isn't that tempting providence?' she asked.

Plowart said: 'I want to make legal history as the criminal who pursued the police.'

She made a gesture of resignation as he went out and climbed the stairs.

The sergeant's room was the first to the left of the landing, and when he eased the door open he saw that the bedside lamp was still burning. He crept over to the side of the bed and looked down on the policeman's face. The expression was youthful, free of thought and responsibility. It was a face that showed not so much intelligence or talent as candour. It was the face of a ploughboy, with nothing but a dull good nature to commend it.

Bending closer until his own face almost touched the sleeper's, he was struck by the vulnerability of a sleeping man and was horrified at the thought of himself in this position at some time every twenty-four hours.

After this reflection, the piquancy of the position struck him, and leaning over further so that his lips came close to the uppermost ear, he said softly: 'Plowart is innocent!' He drove the idea deeper by repeating the words over and over. 'He's innocent . . . innocent . . . innocent!' The sleeping officer turned over uneasily and Plowart thought it advisable to leave the room before he was discovered.

He met Claremont on the point of coming out into the hall to see what had become of him. 'It's all right,' he told her. 'I've been dropping the pill of my innocence into his dreaming ear. Perhaps he'll go about with a dazed expression tomorrow and be my staunchest defender.'

'He's probably wise enough to repudiate everything he encounters in dreams,' she said. She spoke casually without thinking and was surprised when he suddenly whirled her savagely around to face him. 'Stop that!' he shouted. 'I didn't tell you about them to give you ammunition against me!'

'I'm sorry. You've misunderstood me again,' she said, more astonished than frightened by his contorted features. 'It seems you read your own interpretation into everything I say. Can't you see I'm a friend and stop seeking second meanings? It would make everything so much easier.'

'It would be much easier if you watched what you said,' he retorted.

'Do your dreams frighten you to that extent?' she asked, surprised.

He dropped his hands sullenly. 'I'm frightened of nothing,' he muttered, recalling the terror that destroyed his sleep while its unholy injustice left others like Purchamp placid and unvisited.

He sat down at the table and she set an omelette in front of him. After the first mouthful he discovered that he was hungry and ate steadily until there was nothing left.

He looked up then to find her watching him inquisitively. She had barely touched her own food and the few mouthfuls she had taken had probably been only a pretence to encourage him to eat.

Seeing his scowl, she said: 'We've become strangers again.'

'We've never been anything else! Why don't you help me? You've promised you would, and instead you taunt me. Is that your interpretation of friendship?'

'But I've said I'll tell you,' she said. 'Why do you keep pressing me?'

'Because I'm leaving Vachau today.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' In a curious way she was. The way one was sorry, perhaps, when a noise that has become familiar suddenly stops. Then she said: 'But what help do you need? If you ask me a specific question I'll answer you.'

'Don't you understand by now? I can see further into the purpose of life than other men. Every time I go to the light I teeter in a sudden darkness. Others see life superficially . . . when to eat and what, how to dress and when, whom to love and for how long . . . everything they do, they do because it conforms to those around them. Not one of them sees with my intensity!

'But the intensity flickers on and off like a faulty electric light bulb, just powerful enough to show me where I am, but too weak to show me where to go. Now do you see why I need your help?'

In the silence that fell between them, Claremont said seriously: 'You're asking too much of me.'

He shook his head, dismissing her reply. 'As the years go by, I'm closing in on the trouble. I thought until recently that I was a man tortured only by self-division, my purpose and energy torn in opposite directions. But that wasn't true. Essentially, I'm a visionary, with enormous potential power that can boost consciousness beyond all humanity—but I'm still waiting for the vision to come. Half of me is in the wilderness of the visionary—but blind. The seeing half of me is held in the world, with eyes that cannot help despising the smallness and contemptibility of everything around me. My problem is to take that recalcitrant half and hurl it out to join the rest of me. I want to be united at that furthest level of understanding! At the moment I'm a revolutionary; only when I can unite will I move over to the visionary.'

Claremont nodded dubiously. 'You told me about the nightmares, but why do you take them so seriously if you know they *are* only nightmares? It's absurd to lose your temper if one mentions them jokingly.'

He meditated for a moment, wondering how best to explain it to her, then he said: 'Do you know anything about Judo?'

'Yes, of course. The science of self-defence.'

'Exactly. It's almost purely self-defence because the man

who advances—the aggressor—is the one in movement. The Japanese discovered that man is weakest when he's in movement, and that's the principle of Judo. It's also the principle of my nightmares. Until I've moved over to the position where I can unite my two halves, my inadequacy and vulnerability will be shot into me every few nights with these terrifying nightmares. I torment myself by conjuring up spectres that revile and belittle me. In the daytime I can control events because they operate on a superficial level. But I know that an apocalypse would beat me as it would beat other men. The nightmares emphasise that my control goes down to only a trivial depth.'

'What depth is that, Plowart?'

'A revolutionary's. While I'm waiting for my vision I have to keep my sense of purpose concentrated or it will slacken and make me half-dead like everyone else. As a provisional purpose, until I find a better one, I've decided on power over men: to be a world leader.' He paused and added apologetically: 'It's a rudimentary goal, but it keeps me at the right tension. Can you help me to go beyond it?'

'Isn't that asking me to perform a miracle?'

'Can't you?'

She smiled enigmatically and stood up. 'Only with your help. You're looking so hard for revelations you miss the ones under your nose.'

'That's no answer,' Plowart said. 'It's a downright evasion of your promise.'

'If you don't see it for yourself tonight, I promise I'll tell you whatever you want in the morning.' She touched his arm encouragingly. 'But I know you will!'

Plowart, gloomily examining his fingernails, didn't respond to her optimism. She regarded him with concern, but refused to be infected with his gloom.

'Look at the time!' she exclaimed, pointing at the kitchen clock. 'Gone three o'clock! You'd better stay here for the night.' She waved aside his objections. 'You can't possibly face

that walk across the island with the wind blowing so coldly. Listen to the windows rattling!

He had heard them shaking for the past hour, but over the last ten minutes the wind seemed to have increased to almost gale force. 'No, you can't possibly go! You must take Jonathan's bedroom, next to mine. I can put new sheets in and you'll have a more comfortable night than I imagine you've been having with Lumas!' She raised her hand reprovingly as he opened his mouth. 'Not another word!'

He followed her up the stairs and took the room three doors down from the one occupied by Purchamp. She stripped the bed and deftly remade it with fresh sheets and blankets while he looked on. When she had finished, she raised her finger to her lips warningly. 'Now, remember; no noise. We've a sergeant on our doorstep. It might be a good idea to lock your door just in case he's up before us!'

After showing him where the bathroom was, she left him with a smiling goodnight.

Alone, he flung himself on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. After the grimy colour of the attic room that he had stared at since arriving on Vachau, he found this whiteness refreshing. Next door, he heard the faint sounds of Claremont undressing.

The sounds were provocative; the creak of a chair, the fall of a shoe, the sound of bare feet crossing and recrossing the room behind the wall.

Plowart got off the bed and undressed. She had given him an old pair of her father's pyjamas, but he only used the trousers. They were a dull scarlet with a faint sheen where the light struck them at an angle. He climbed into bed, turning this way and that, but unable to sleep. After a time he gave up trying and lay flat on his back. What was it that she had said? He was missing the revelations under his nose. Then she had touched his arm! Had she meant that? It was all she could have meant. If it wasn't that, why had she insisted he should stay and put him in the room adjoining hers?

But was it as simple as the joining of two bodies, the mingling of breath, the way of the Lachanells? 'You are looking too hard for what's under your nose!'

Was he? He thought about it, remembering again the girl's body as she had shown it the night before. And then, abruptly, it ceased to be imaginary and became a physical torment.

He lay for a moment fighting it back with premonitions of disillusion and defeat. Instead of abating, however, his need became more burning until it was a torture to know that she lay next door. Her presence was radiating through the wall in a clear tantalising call that could not be withstood.

Perspiration broke over his face and chest with the effort of resisting, but soon it was impossible.

Almost without thinking, he climbed out of the bed and opened his door . . .

The door of her room was not locked. Inside it was so dark he hesitated, trying to locate her. As he strained his eyes to penetrate the shadows, the sleeping girl stirred quietly in the far corner of the room. The sound was sufficient to guide him to where she lay.

As he stood over her, Claremont awoke and, sensing she was not alone, half rose as he ripped aside the bedclothes and savagely pulled her to him. More asleep than awake, she gaspingly resisted, but he was too strong and each time she tried to repulse him Plowart conquered more of her.

It was then, at the moment when she should have made her final effort, that Claremont gave up the physical contest and retreated to her unearthly serenity. But though he recognised that total possession was now impossible, his passion had to be satisfied.

When he had finished, Plowart knew she had triumphed over him once again. He lay still, breathing deeply as the life returned to her body where it touched his. Still lying on her back and not turning her head, she said evenly: 'Was it really worth it?'

'At the beginning it could have been everything,' he

replied. 'After that it was only a disappointment. You were wrong to think this would solve anything.'

'What? Did you think. . . ?' She did not complete the question for it was obvious what he had thought. After a moment's meditation she said: 'Oh, what's the use of talking, Plowart! We shall never understand each other!' There was no anger in her voice. The realisation of his condition left her no ground for condemnation, despite what he had done to her.

'So I'll get no more help from you!'

'I shall not stop helping you until you leave Vachau,' she told him. 'Whatever you've done, I must aid not judge you; you're a sick man, Plowart!'

Sick! How could she confuse strength with sickness? But he did not reply and after a while she fell asleep, stirring occasionally as if her dreams were troubled, while he lay beside her, brooding.

No, physical love was not the answer. It was impossible to imagine a passion capable of eclipsing the storm that had raged within him tonight, but it had not been enough. At its beginning, when he felt that his body must burst, it had seemed that only a narrow ribbon of space divided him from complete transfiguration into something more. But the body had failed to carry him across. At its summit, physical passion was almost a springboard to vision; but the impetus was not strong enough.

The real answer lay elsewhere. Others could rhapsodise over love, but they were content with lesser heights. To be even in the neighbourhood of having their cheap souls transformed was a sufficient miracle for them. To him, the neighbourhood was too familiar. It had to be the highest peak or nothing. Others again, sang of comradeship but he knew no comradeship was possible unless power was matched with power. And even if this impossible pairing came to pass its inherent defect was that self-sufficiency inevitably meant isolation. Love was a reinforcement of weakness, a mutual repairing of faults . . . a superimposing of one faulty screen

over another, with the hope that the holes in one would not be matched in the other.

He got out of the bed and went over to the window. There was nothing to be seen outside; the winds had driven clouds across the moon and although he knew there were tall trees only thirty yards away he could see no sign of them.

Plowart sat without moving until the dawn came. With the first light coming through the windows, he left Claremont's room and went next door, where, shivering a little, he pulled on his trousers and shirt. He took the rest of his clothes with him to the bathroom.

The mirror showed a face that was still puffy and bruised from Lachanell's fists. In the first-aid cabinet he found a roll of adhesive tape and changed the dressing above his eye as the bath was running. While he lay in the hot water, he thought impersonally of Lachanell with his surreptitious love affairs and his cowardly attacks. It would be no loss to leave him and his kind when he caught the afternoon boat.

After lying in the hot water for half an hour, he towelled himself and dressed, then went back to Claremont's room. She was still asleep and, while he waited for her to wake up, he felt in his pocket for the letter describing Bourcey's death. Failing to find it, he searched through his other pockets, first with bewilderment then frantically. It was no use. The letter had gone. Now that he knew it was lost his mind became icy, setting out his movements one after the other from the time he had picked up the letter when Claremont called him from the terrace. He followed himself, walking down the stairs; going through the room and talking to her; returning to Lumas and warning him to replace his defences; then walking through the garden . . . Lachanell!

So the attack had not been so pointless! But how had he known about the letter? Was he working in alliance with Purchamp? It seemed the only explanation until he remembered the conversation he had had with Claremont in which both the murder and the letter had been mentioned. Lachanell

must have been waiting in the garden from the beginning. As he arrived at this conclusion he heard the sound of Purchamp rising. He moved swiftly to the door, locking it as the police officer walked past on his way to the lavatory.

It was eight o'clock now, and tip-toeing over to the sleeping girl he touched her shoulder. She stirred almost instantly and opened her eyes. 'Purchamp's up,' he said. 'I'd better be going.'

Claremont watched him gravely, recollecting what had happened between them in the night. 'Yes, I suppose you should,' she said.

He hesitated at the door and said: 'If you were serious about still helping me, there's a favour I'd like to ask of you before I go.'

'What is it?'

His face cleared at her reassurance, and taking out a pencil and his diary he scribbled on one of the pages a number of names and addresses. Tearing out the leaf, he gave it to her with two banknotes. 'Take these,' he said. 'I want you to go over to Guernsey today and telegraph each of these persons with the same words: "Don't write—Plowart".'

Answering the unspoken question of her lifted eyebrows, he explained: 'After that affair yesterday, Purchamp will send word over to Guernsey for the police to open my mail before it reaches Vachau.'

'But I thought you said you were leaving Vachau today. Can't you telegraph yourself and get the post office to turn your mail back on the mainland?'

'I've decided to stay on Vachau to complete a little unfinished business.'

'You can rely on me,' she said. 'Now you'd better go.'

He crept softly along the passage and down the stairs. When he let himself out he walked into the steady, almost noon-time glare of summer. The morning had the intensity of a cauterising agent, driving heat deep into everything lying under it.

Plowart strode swiftly along the drive, and slowed down

only under cover of the trees, where he was sure he could no longer be observed from the windows of the Seigniory.

Once on the road beyond the iron gates, he took off his jacket and set off in the direction of the Siren.

The tavern was cool after the heat outside and he ordered a breakfast of toast and marmalade, together with a pot of tea. After he had settled his bill he asked for a bottle of rum and had it wrapped in thick paper to keep the sun from it.

The path to the cliffs was a short one, but he did not stop walking until he reached the small peninsula that Claremont had shown him. When he reached it he sat down and lit a cigarette. He smoked continuously for several hours, hurling the finished cigarette ends over the cliff edge. In the early afternoon, when he had made his decisions, he stripped the paper from the bottle. The wrappings had served their purpose. The rum was still cool and he drank in long swallows, despite the stuff's unpleasant smell and taste.

By the time the bottle was half-empty he was already drunk, but he went on drinking until it was all gone. Getting to his feet unsteadily, he sent the bottle to join the cigarette ends. It went in a wide, curving fall to the sea, hit the water in a pimple of spray and vanished almost immediately. As he was peering over, he lurched and fell heavily. Only a large rock saved him from going over the edge too.

The realisation of how close he had come to death penetrated his befuddled brain and froze him for a moment. The rum was rising and falling in his almost empty stomach, seeming to redouble its potency. He struggled to his feet again and took three or four stumbling steps away from the edge, but his senses were whirling kaleidoscopically, causing him to fall again and lie still. After a time his eyes opened and tried to concentrate on a rock but they refused to focus. The rum rose to its highest point. Suddenly he could hold it no longer and vomited miserably.

The trouble was that he had never learned to drink.

Ten

Six hours later, in the early evening, the wan, gaunt figure of Plowart approached the house from the path winding along the cliffs. Despite the remedies he had been given by the Siren's landlord, his legs were still unsteady and his head was burning from the combined effects of the rum and his exposure to the sun. His condition affected everything he looked at, so that even objects as static as the cliffs acquired movement as he stared at them.

Although the journey had seemed endless, when the high building with its coating of faded blue paint came in sight, paradoxically he wished it a little further off, together with the people in it. At this stirring of squeamishness he shook his head impatiently and turned down towards the garden. As he neared the house he heard a series of small explosions echoing from the direction of the french windows. It sounded like the shattering of weighted glass and the silences between each detonation made the succeeding noise louder.

Plowart advanced curiously until he came in sight of the french windows, then stopped in astonishment. Lumas had flung the windows wide and was standing over a pile of crates. From these crates he was pulling out bottle after bottle and hurling them on to the stone terrace. As Plowart watched, another crate was emptied and impetuously flung aside.

The cripple's actions had the frenzied impulsiveness of a madman, and when Plowart walked closer he could see tears streaming down his face and hear his repetitive exclamations of: 'There! . . . There! . . . There!' as each bottle broke into a hundred pieces.

Lumas was so busy with what he was doing he did not see

Plowart until he was alongside him, and then he exclaimed without preliminaries: 'It's no use, Plowart! Unless I do it, she'll leave me! They've got to go or she will. If I smash the lot and promise never to pull another cork, she won't go with him. I know she just wants one sign—the least gesture—to show I'm not the wretch I was, and we'll be re-united.'

'I'm not too proud to admit I've been a bad husband since the cliffs wrecked me. She had to find someone to comfort her, I understand that. But now I've become a new man, filled with remorse for what I've been all these years. She can take my word for it that we can live together without any of the disgust or repugnance I've aroused in her these past few years. I've never blamed her for it, Plowart!

'No, it's natural a decent woman should feel like that! It's me who's wrong, not her. I confess it honestly, but I'm not so vile I can't appreciate the horror of what I've become. Isn't that a sign of hope?'

His babbling as he went on smashing bottles told Plowart that the man was closer to madness than he had suspected.

'You didn't feel this way last night,' Plowart observed. 'What's happened?'

'She's been seeing him again!' Lumas said despairingly. 'I saw it on her face this afternoon. He's trying to persuade her to go to Guernsey, I know it! That's all he wants; to take her away and never mind what happens to me. But I'm as good as he is! She'll allow me that when I show her what I've done here. She's a sensible woman, Plowart. The moment she sees the significance of this, all her doubts will be swept away. I admit I've enjoyed the miseries of being maimed. What did I care whether others saw my motives or not? I wanted to find pity and humility and if it meant dirt and drunken belchings, well, whose concern was it but mine! But she thought only of how I would disgust everybody.'

'No, I shouldn't say that! It's me who's wrong, not her. Dirt offends women like my wife, Plowart! They can't see the honesty of it. Didn't Christ go dirty, dressed in his rags

through Jerusalem? Wasn't he a wine drinker? What's more natural after wine than a good belch, eh? But my wife couldn't grasp it. We can't blame her for it; she's only a woman. She can only love or not love, because that's a woman's part in life. We mustn't expect women to find a greater rôle than that. . . .'

Plowart cut across his endless rambling sharply. 'What are you talking about, Lumas? Do you think you're changing the situation by talking to me? Lachanell isn't going to be converted by this show any more than your wife is. See what she says when you show her the mess you've made. You'll find you've wasted your wine for nothing!'

Lumas stopped his activity for a moment and looked sideways at his companion, the cunning showing clearly on his face. The glance somehow convinced him that Plowart was provoking him without any understanding of what his wife's reaction would be, and he turned away saying: 'No, you're wrong, Plowart. She'll see what this means. She's used to loving me and it's just a case of refreshing the habit. You just watch! I'll prove it to you when there's not a bottle left in the house.'

'All right; I'm willing to apologise when the time comes,' Plowart said. 'But I doubt that I shall need to.'

He went up the stairs feeling sick and wanting to bathe his face in cold water, but when he reached the top floor he turned down the corridor to Anne Lumas' bedroom. He knocked on the door and said loudly: 'I want to speak to you, Mrs Lumas.'

The woman turned the key in the lock and looked out through the half-opened door. 'What do you want?' she asked coolly, her face inscrutable. It wasn't the way she acted in Lachanell's arms.

'Lachanell stole a letter from me last night. A very private letter. I'm prepared to return the grapnel and key to the room in exchange for my letter. I will let you have them now so he can get in the house before he parts with the letter.' He spoke brusquely, wasting no words on her.

The bed creaked heavily within the room, then the door

opened wide as Lachanell came to join the woman with a jeering smile on his face. 'There's no need for any exchanges,' he said. 'Anne took the grapnel and key from your room this afternoon. She didn't think she ought to wait for your permission.'

Plowart smiled faintly: 'That was very enterprising of you, Mrs Lumas.' Turning back to Lachanell, he said: 'The grapnel will do you no good if I tell Lumas about it. Since you already have the grapnel and key I offer my silence in return for the letter—and your silence.' Plowart gestured to Anne Lumas. 'Have you told her about the letter?'

'Give me a chance! I've only been here an hour,' Lachanell retorted. 'We've had more important things to discuss than your crimes!'

'What letter is this?' the woman asked. Her question confirmed Lachanell's reply.

'She knows nothing! All right, Mr Chopper, we'll make a deal. My silence for yours! Nobody will know about you, if Lumas knows nothing about me.'

'I included the letter,' Plowart said.

Lachanell laughed and clasped him on the shoulder familiarly. 'So you did. 'But I'm going to keep that until I set off back to Guernsey. As a certificate of seaworthiness, if you like! Don't worry about it.'

'Very well,' Plowart said. 'But just see nobody reads it; my life depends upon it.'

'I know. What a weapon it would make in the wrong hands, eh?' the tomato grower said mockingly. 'The hands at the Seignior, let's say. Miss Capothy's guest would be most interested in it.' The smile left his face and he said threateningly: 'So don't make any mistakes, Friend, if you get my meaning.'

'I won't,' Plowart answered. 'So it's silence for silence?'

'Absolute!' Lachanell replied. 'And don't you worry about anyone getting their paws on the letter, either. I'll keep it with me all the time!'

Plowart gathered that this last remark was to dissuade him from searching the room during their absence, rather than an assurance of the letter's safety. But he chose to ignore it, and said: 'As we've become allies, I'll give you a warning. Lumas is smashing his wine bottles to demonstrate to this lady that he intends to reform and become a better man. When he's smashed the last one, he's coming up here to tell her. If I were you I'd keep out of the way until the early hours. He's not in a pleasant mood, I can tell you.'

'Poor Christopher! Yes, he's right; you'd better go. Christopher's suffered too much already.' The woman's expression of concern increased his contempt for her.

Lachanell said cheerfully: 'Right you are. Then I'll get out for a few hours. I'll wait down the corridor until I hear him coming up the stairs, then nip out of the window. Thanks for the warning, Friend!'

'Don't thank me,' Plowart told him coldly. 'Thank those damned ears of yours and a blow in the dark. You've left me no choice!' He walked away as the man closed the door, chuckling quietly.

Plowart went down the stairs and into the drawing-room just as the cripple flung the last empty crate to join the debris on the terrace. 'There, Plowart!' he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder, 'That's the lot! Now perhaps she'll see me differently.'

'Just a moment,' Plowart said. 'First I want to have a few words with you. Sit down.'

He sat down himself while he was waiting for the cripple to pull himself on to his seat at the table.

'Well, what is it, Plowart? I can't spend hours talking, when there's more important business waiting for me upstairs. Oh, my darling's going to be overjoyed with what I've done today.'

'Let me talk!' Plowart exclaimed impatiently. 'Do you think what you've done is going to alter the situation? I tell you it won't—not a bit. You are going the wrong way about this business, Lumas, and you have from the beginning. Unless

you change your tactics, you'll lose that wife of yours, and all the tears and appeals in the world won't stop her going. Do you know why? . . . Because she's reached the end of her penance! She thinks she's paid the price for what she did to you, and now she's off!

'Penance? Did to me? What do you mean?' stammered the cripple, staring at him.

'It's guilt that's kept her here for the last six years, not pity. I've been doing a little investigating on my own account and I've discovered a number of interesting facts.'

Lumas who had been following his words with increasing agitation said: 'Tell me what you've discovered for God's sake!' Then in a sudden terror he shouted: 'No, keep quiet! I don't want to know what you've found out, whatever it is!'

Plowart smiled thinly, ignoring his appeal, and continued: 'What made you think it was an accident that sent you over the cliffs?'

Lumas gazed at him wordlessly. When Plowart said nothing further, merely sitting back with an impenetrable expression, the cripple finally recovered himself and shouted: 'Because I was drunk! I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing on that path back from the Siren. Nobody would have known what they were doing in my condition. It was an accident, I tell you. And I was lucky to get away with my life!'

'You were,' Plowart agreed, watching him steadily. 'You're such an unsuspecting fool that you'll probably never know just how lucky. But what makes you think a man—drunk or sober—can fall over a cliff edge he knows is there? He can't, as I know from my own experience. I got helplessly drunk this afternoon and actually teetered over the edge of a cliff, but I pulled myself back. No, the instinct of self-preservation is too highly developed to let us fall over cliffs, however drunk!'

'But a man can certainly get sufficiently drunk to be unaware of someone dogging his footsteps in the dark. Someone, let's say, who had watched our man drink all evening, in the parlour of the Siren. When he went out and took the path

along the cliffs it would have been easy for that someone to slip out after him and follow until he could rush up from behind and push him over.

‘Nobody would push a man over the cliffs unless he had a motive. Well, what would it be in your case? A grudge? You said yourself you never had dealings with the Islanders from the time you first came here, so how could anyone have a chance to quarrel with you? There’s robbery, of course. But how can anyone rob a man who falls into the sea?—which is where you should have fallen! You see, Lumas, there’s no point in murdering a drunken man unless the profit is in his death!’

Plowart regarded Lumas intently and stopped speaking for a moment to give significance to what he was saying: ‘A good profit, for instance, would be the turning of a desirable wife into a widow!’

‘Now do you understand why I call you an unsuspecting fool? Only you could have gone all these years without any suspicions about that fall. Combine stupidity with drunkenness and every murder would go undiscovered. There’s complete safety in hurting a baby, an animal or a drunk for that very reason: they are all incapable of giving evidence.’

Lumas had been listening to this discourse with an expression that became more tortured with every word, his lips quiveringly open on decaying teeth. He whispered: ‘So I was pushed. That’s what you’re saying. Pushed to my death.’ He paused, then asked tremulously: ‘Did she know?’

‘Not until it was too late,’ Plowart said. ‘What do you think kept her here? Guilt that her lover had turned you into a cripple! But this time she’s leaving Vachau. She’s made up her mind, despite all your good resolutions. There’s only one way of stopping her now. The same way Lachanell used when he wanted to free her of you. Why shouldn’t you? He governs her every thought! Freed of him, she’d be yours again.’

Lumas darted a furtive look at him and said in an undertone: ‘He’s too strong for me.’

'Let me tell you what's in the wind. I heard them talking a few hours ago and it seems he is going to climb in through that open window at the top of the house. There's a grapnel and rope already fixed to the sill waiting for him. When he's inside, he intends to spend the night with her and carry out her luggage soon after dawn, while the island's asleep. But before that he's going to finish you for good and all. Does that surprise you? He didn't say so, of course, but I saw it written all over his face. And doesn't it follow? You owe your life, since that so-called accident, to the fact that you haven't stopped them from meeting. But now you've become an obstruction. Do you think he's going to tolerate the possibility of further interference? He's clever enough to know you'll follow them to Guernsey. At least, you will if you're still alive! Don't you see it for yourself? It's over the cliffs for you again—unless you do something! There won't be a police investigation here—everybody will say you went over when you were drunk. Just like the other time.'

'Anne wouldn't let him,' the cripple groaned.

'She wouldn't even know,' Plowart pointed out. 'That's the clever part of it. She'd think you were still asleep when she goes. Even if she found out, she'd forgive him because he dominates her.'

'It's not true, Plowart,' the tortured man exclaimed.

'Go upstairs and look for yourself. I hope you've got a spare key to that room; they've already stolen yours while you were drunk. He's left nothing to chance, you'll find.'

'Once you're satisfied that it's true, I suggest you sit and wait for him. The lesson of war is that if there are blows to be struck, strike the first yourself!'

'Stop talking,' Lumas muttered. 'Leave me to think. . . .'

As he left the room Plowart said: 'If you miss that first blow your chances against him are nil!'

He climbed the ladder to the attic with the acid of alcohol still in his mouth and a feeling of immense weariness accompanying every movement he made. In this condition he

noticed that his mind defensively calculated in advance each small effort involved in even the simplest operation, like carrying the full kettle from the water jug to the range. It gave everything he did a sense of duplication.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, he stripped off his clothes and flung them to join the flannels ruined by his fall from the spur. A succession of drunken collapses on the peninsula had dirtied and torn the garments and this, together with the mental misery of the afternoon, intensified his dislike of liquor and deprived it even of its use as a medicinal agent. Drink did not lessen one's problems any more than it helped one to forget them. The drunks who swore by it as a defence against painful memories or a black future emerged as patent imbeciles. But he was the fool for allowing his own crisis to persuade him that he needed such remedies!

He set the washing bowl on the floor and poured an arc of water into it from the kettle. The water was tepid because he had not waited for it to boil and before he had finished washing it was so cold that he was shivering. He carried the bowl to the window and threw the water on to the terrace, where it sent the broken bottles tinkling in all directions along the flagstones.

Replacing the bowl on the washstand he saw that the day in the sun had brought him a tan. With the white strip of plaster to set it off, the tan gave his face a new youthfulness. Plowart studied the reflection searchingly because it was not the face of the man who had come here with a London pallor a few days ago. It was a face belonging to a time much further back than that.

He pulled on his white bathing robe and knotted the belt ruminatively.

When he had been a rampant idealist of eighteen, he had been one of a circle of youths that had rotated about a singularly beautiful girl. She had professed a preference for physical flawlessness and set the example herself. All of the young men had sedulously vied in their efforts to train and

develop their physiques, himself foremost. The crashing *naïveté* of that phase with its idiotic triumphs—an idle smile, a soft, platonic kiss upon the cheek; a shared laugh—came back to him clearly. Oh, the futility of idealism! It was an escape as ineffectual as drunkenness.

He refilled the kettle and put it back on the calor gas, smiling bitterly.

She had married, that goddess of theirs, a nonentity from the City. By now she had probably regaled him with all the names of her early admirers. That was what girls did to stimulate their husbands' sense of achievement when they thought the game hadn't been worth the candle and they were better off single.

All the names. . . . He closed his eyes and pictured the laughing, dreamy and audacious faces of that fraternity of rivals . . . all safe in the happy anonymity of mediocrity. He alone was vulnerable to her. When he was famous she would be there to talk about his gaucheness. No doubt she could even recall a choice collection of endearments which he had steeled himself to utter during that experimental period. There would be no compunction about relating them for publication when the right offer came, for she was another Lachanell, patiently waiting for the time when the weapon could best be pointed at him.

Now the kettle was boiling. Leaning over, he poured the water into the cup and strainer at his feet. Milk had been omitted from Lachanell's provisions so he threw extra sugar into the tea to compensate for it.

. . . But neither Lachanell nor the girl would be in a position to reveal anything; his precautions had carefully eliminated the possibility.

The blunt truth was that the world leader's first duty was to create a legend of infallibility, and so long as there was someone who could shine a torch of recollection the legend was in jeopardy. It was as pointless having pity for them as having scruples about a tree on the site of a skyscraper. If its felling

was noticed, an outcry was inevitable of course. But it did not last for long. When the mammoth building stood in its place, sentiment reconciled itself to the beauty of concrete forms and gradually forgot the tree completely. Customs changed easily, upheld as they were by one generation only, and that, the one closest to dotage and death. Its successor accepted the changes and by the time it became the older generation in its turn, it had elevated what had been iconoclastic to respectability.

The proof was the Napoleons, the Cromwells and the Ataturks. Had they been innocent of follies? Obviously there were countless examples of criminality in all their lives but they had obliterated the vital evidence, and so would he. Ruthlessness had to come first; pity could replace it only when one's position was secure. There was no other way.

His thoughts were severed by a sudden crash below, followed by a burst of raised voices. Almost immediately, heavy footsteps retreated along the corridor and ended at the slamming of a door. It was over almost in a matter of seconds, but it was enough to tell him that Lachanell had come back to find Lumas waiting in the dark for him.

With his head turned sideways and the cup still at his lips he listened for the cripple's dragging footsteps going in pursuit, but when the silence remained unbroken, he descended the ladder. On the landing he paused, but the protracted silence and the light showing under the woman's bedroom at the far end of the corridor confirmed his suspicions that Lachanell's reception had misfired and he decided to investigate.

Plowart went to the room where Lumas had waited and found the door wide open. The moon was riding clearly in front of the window aperture, dividing the room with a central band of blue and silver. Glancing about quickly he couldn't make out more than a few irregular outlines of chairs and tables on either side of the moonlight. He was on the point of returning to the corridor, when Lumas called weakly: 'Plowart?'

He looked around. 'Where are you?'

'To your left. At your feet, not on the ceiling!'

Plowart found him lying on the floor with his head and shoulders propped against the skirting of the near wall. He stepped over the twisted shadow of his legs and bent down.

'Are you hurt?'

'Of course, I am! That's why I'm down here,' the cripple said pettishly. 'He was too strong for me! The moment I spoke he cracked my head against the wall and went rushing away. Pull me up, now! I can't sit here all night.'

When he had got the cripple to his feet, Plowart helped him across the room to the banisters outside. Gasping from his exertions, Lumas said heavily: 'Where did he go?'

'To your wife's bedroom. Where else? While you prepare your stupid speeches, he's only concerned with getting what he wants, and the less said the better!' Plowart said angrily.

'Her bedroom!' He drew in his breath slowly, then hobbled down the corridor, leaning briefly against the wall at every step. When he reached the door of his wife's bedroom, he wrenched on the handle. The door was locked, of course. Halted by this obvious but unforeseen obstacle, the cripple shook the handle furiously. 'Come out, Lachanell! I want to talk to you!' he shouted. 'Come out, I tell you!'

He was ignored, and his voice instantly became wheedling. 'Good Heavens, do you mean me to understand we can't discuss our differences like gentlemen? No, surely not. What's wrong with the world when we can't even do that?'

'I'm willing to allow that I'm an old fool. Yes, indeed, I am! And aren't we all, when it comes to losing something we cherish and can't conceivably replace? It's ridiculous to be possessive, I grant you. Yes, it's even shameful. But isn't it human? At our most human we're all wearing our most ridiculous clothes—who'll deny that? But there's no harm in either of us for all our fumings, eh?'

When there was still no movement to open the door, he became even more conciliatory.

'My dear fellow, you mustn't think I hold any grievances for that vicious attack of yours a few minutes ago. Oh, yes, I was knocked senseless . . . but what of it? I've got a skull like an eggshell and my legs are too tottery to be decent, that's why. It's not that you had evil intentions or were brutal to a cripple. True, there are many people who might idly jump to that conclusion, but as for myself I'm a reasonable man. All I ask is that you meet me half-way. . . .

'But how do you expect me to be reasonable when you won't show your face? Now, unlock this door like a good fellow and come downstairs with me. Without the lady to sway us to grandeur or bombastic remarks not a bit in keeping with our true selves, you'll soon see how quickly we can come to understand and sympathise with each other!'

Plowart leaned against the banisters and listened with tired distaste. Although it was perfectly evident that Lachanell had no intention of coming out, this was beyond the cripple's comprehension. He would have continued talking all night if the light under the door had not suddenly gone out.

The effect was to throw the cripple into a frenzy of despair. 'No, don't!' he screamed, banging on the door with both fists. 'Put the light on! You don't have to do it in stealth! I can hear the bed creaking, you animals! Don't, I tell you! Have pity on me! Can't you wait? Stop it! Control yourselves!' He took a few steps back then flung himself against the door with all his strength so the wood quivered, strong as it was. Thrown back violently by its resistance, Lumas was sent sprawling, but he pulled himself forward again on his belly.

He lay for a while, with his ear pressed to the small margin of space below the door, breathing harshly, then he whispered in a voice that had lost all its rage: 'Don't worry, my darling. I'll have you safe soon. Keep resisting his advances until I reach you; it won't be long, now. Just a little time to recover my breath and then he'll find you're no unprotected girl. Have courage, I beg of you. I'm still out here in the dark!'

He continued giving this ludicrous advice to a wife he fully knew was unfaithful, as though she was a girl whose affection was still wholly his. This change of attitude bordered on the comical, but listening to the man's interminable monologue of admonitions, encouragements and promises, Plowart saw only the horror. Now the cripple turned his attention back to Lachanell, abusing and threatening him.

Seeing his abuse produced as little result as the appeals, he started to shout and scream, kicking the door like an hysterical schoolgirl. He continued this hullabaloo until he was absolutely spent, then leaned against the wall panting. The door could resist twenty cripples when it came to a contest of strength.

Plowart turned away contemptuously and went back to his room. The impotence of the cripple disgusted him as much as his lack of dignity. He had a moment of pity when he unknotted his bathing gown and kicked off his shoes, but he rejected it angrily. Pity was self-identification and in this case it nauseated him. It was plain he had wasted time using the wrong instrument to achieve his purpose.

He drew the sheet up to his chin without much hope of getting to sleep. It was almost certain that as soon as Lumas got his wind back he would start kicking up a din again. But he did not, for Plowart not only managed to go to sleep but, tired as he was after the episode of the peninsula, actually slept soundly for nine hours.

* * *

He was surprised when he opened his eyes to see how high the sun was; by the look of it, it was well past noon, but his watch was over on the washstand so he could not check. The scene that had played itself out in the first hours of the morning gradually came back to him, and he scowled at its futility. It was always the same with these small people. A lot of shouting, a parcel of threats and, at worst, the temporary rupture of a relationship.

The day was cold on his skin, and he pulled on his shirt and trousers hurriedly, then crossed the room to close the

windows. He looked down on the terrace absently as he jammed the catch, and saw Lumas lying motionless on the flagstones among the broken bottles, empty crates and the dried pools of wine. He was lying with his arms and legs pointing in different directions and his face pressed down on the stones. The position of his body suggested he had been dropped from a great height, but hearing the sounds of Plowart closing the window, he moved feebly, to show he was not only alive but that this was just another piece of shamming.

Plowart automatically banged the windows shut and put on his shoes, tying the laces methodically. Before he left the attic he looked around quickly, then caught up his jacket and went down to investigate. Struck by a sudden thought on the landing, he walked along to Anne Lumas' bedroom. The room was empty but, from the disordered state of the bed, it seemed the pair had suffered no great discomfort from the presence of Lumas outside their door. A diaphanous blue nightgown with delicately sewn rosebuds at its bodice had been thrown across the pillows. It was a curiously feminine garment for such an unsmiling woman, he reflected, going down the stairs.

On his way through the drawing-room he encountered chaos. Two armchairs were lying on their backs and the cover of a third had been ripped off and was trailing on the carpet with sundry cushions. Several of the high-backed chairs lining the table had been shoved away and piles of crockery that had been stacked on the sideboard were now lying smashed across the room. Stepping on the terrace he noticed that one of the french windows had been almost wrenched off its hinges and two or three of its panes had been broken.

Plowart walked over to Lumas and shook him roughly. 'All right. Stop your bluffing. What happened?'

Lumas groaned and, shaking off his hand, said in a muffled voice: 'Go away, damn you! You've come when it's too late!'

'I've just woken up. Has he taken your wife off?'

The cripple raised his face and Plowart saw his eyes were

swollen with crying and his grimy cheeks were stained with tears. 'Go away, for Christ's sake!' he shouted. 'Can't you see my condition?'

Plowart looked about him curiously and saw that the terrace was spattered with blood. He straightened up and slowly walked from one patch to another. Some of the bloodstains were mere flecks, but others were large and cored with blackness. He went back to Lumas and turned him over without wasting words. The front of the man's shirt, his waistcoat and trousers, were a mess of blood. Watching his face, Lumas cried querulously: 'I'll answer no questions!'

'I'll go in and find some bandages and hot water,' he said curtly. As he was going back into the house, Lumas whispered: 'No need.'

'You're bleeding like a stuck pig,' Plowart told him without delicacy. His mind was already on the tomato grower carrying his letter off Vachau. If he went after him on the afternoon boat perhaps he could catch up with him on Guernsey sometime in the late afternoon. One consolation was that Lachanell wouldn't exactly be in a position to contact the police with the injured cripple on his conscience.

'It's all his blood,' Lumas said in a muffled voice. 'I was caught in the full squirt of it.'

Plowart went back to him with a feeling of profound relief and lifted him to his feet. 'You'd better come in and sit down,' he said.

Lumas raised no more objections, but he was as inert as a corpse and Plowart had to support his whole weight into the house. When the cripple slid off his shoulder and on to the high chair, Plowart said: 'Sit still while I get some water for you. It's a pity you broke all the bottles or you could have had something more to your taste.'

'There's a bottle I overlooked under the table,' Lumas said, with a covert glance at him. Plowart's wintry smile as he bent and retrieved the bottle intimated that this oversight in the breakages was not altogether unexpected. He drew the cork

and filled a glass which the cripple instantly grabbed and emptied. Plowart refilled it for him.

The cripple leaned back sighing. 'Ah, you're very good to me, Plowart,' he said. 'I never suspected you could be kind if you tried. But now I'm not worth it after what I've done.'

'You're worth it to me,' Plowart assured him, taking care not to ask any questions that might antagonise the fellow too soon. 'Don't feel too badly about it. He provoked you enough, God knows!'

'And God knows I did wrong! No, Plowart, I can't enjoy any salve for my conscience. I won't disguise it from you: if there's such a thing as damnation, then what I've done has earned me it. There'll be no forgiveness for me.'

Plowart looked at him keenly; so he was already beginning to boast about it and enjoy the pangs of contrition. That was a sign of some return to his natural resilience, anyhow. He decided to risk the question. 'Is he dead?'

Lumas looked up from his contemplation of the wine. 'Dead? Dear God, yes! I'm as certain of it as I'm certain of the satisfaction on your face!'

'Have another glass!'

Lumas laughed delightedly. 'You're changing the subject, Plowart! Don't you want me to know you're glad?'

'Of course, I am. It was either him or you. Here, take this.'

Lumas took the replenished glass, looking at Plowart cunningly. 'Will you tell the police that?' Already he had acquired the furtiveness that belongs to every lawbreaker, ready to steal any advantage to save his own neck.

'Certainly. If it's necessary.'

After he had finished his third glass of wine, Lumas began to snivel softly, and then weep openly. The metamorphosis of the man to a child was startling. As he cried he screwed up his face and rumbled his hair. His anguish and self-recriminations were pitiful.

For all his contempt Plowart felt uncomfortable. 'Here, don't cry,' he said. 'Wipe your eyes! You've nothing to blame

yourself for.' He passed across his handkerchief and watched its whiteness transformed into a sodden grey as he waited for the cripple to regain sufficient composure to answer questions. He had to find out if there was a chance the giant tomato grower was still alive. And even if he was dead, as Lumas had said, he would have to get that incriminating letter from his pocket before the body was found.

As he was patting the cripple's shoulder, the sound of footsteps on the flagstones outside made him swing around to the french windows. Lumas heard them also and stopped weeping to look up. The windows darkened for a moment, then opened hesitantly and Claremont looked in. She narrowed her eyes to combat the dirtiness of the room and saw Plowart and Lumas simultaneously. 'May I come in?' she asked.

'No. Go back to the Seigniory!' Plowart said shortly. 'There's been an accident and we don't want outsiders.'

Lumas, seeing it was not a resurrected Lachanell, had laid his head back on his arms and was weeping afresh. On hearing the word 'Seigniory' however, he raised his head and said: 'Is it Miss Capothy? Come in if you want, Miss, but ours is a house of misery today, I warn you.'

'I think I will come in,' Claremont said, shooting a sharp, questioning glance at Plowart. She stepped into the room, looking about her curiously. It was evidently the first time she had been inside the house, and the debris of broken furniture and crockery made her lift her eyebrows. There was not enough light for her to see the nature of the dark markings that smeared Lumas' clothing; but the girl had known something was wrong before she had entered the room. After watching Lumas intently for a moment, she came straight to the point.

'Whose are those bloodstains on the terrace?'

'They're probably wine stains,' Plowart said. 'Lumas here has started his spring cleaning.'

'You're right, Miss. It's blood,' Lumas said, jerking his head up from his arms and regarding the girl tearfully. The old devil was enjoying his drama, all right!

Claremont said gently: 'What's happened here, Mr Lumas?'

'I've killed a man: I confess it to the world! Why should I hide it?'

Not in the least taken aback by this extraordinary admission, she looked at him steadily until he dropped his eyes. Nobody could have looked less like a killer than Lumas at that moment. She pulled out a chair and sat down. 'Perhaps you'd better tell me about it,' she suggested.

Encouraged by her sympathetic tone, Lumas said in a trembling voice: 'He was my wife's lover.'

'Lachanell? Yes, I know. I've already heard about him.' She glanced at Plowart but his face was expressionless.

In a sudden rage Lumas banged his fist down on the table. 'It's gone on for six years and now I've finished it!' he shouted. 'Isn't that a man's right?'

When neither Plowart nor the girl replied, he shrank visibly and, seeing she was as indifferent to histrionics as Plowart, he told the story of what had happened in the morning with surprisingly few flourishes. His voice broke several times as he recreated the chain of events, but he told the story to its end. After describing how Lachanell had used the attic and been stopped by Plowart's occupation of the room, he went on:

'He planned to murder me in the night because I'd put my foot down on his love-making. When I knew what he was up to, I waited in the dark for him, hoping I'd persuade him to give her up because she's all I've got. But he'd have none of it! As soon as I spoke to him he flung me on the floor and locked himself in my wife's bedroom. I tried to appeal to him but he wouldn't listen.' He turned to Plowart. 'He wouldn't listen, would he?'

'Not on any account,' Plowart said. He was uncomfortably aware that Claremont's gaze had not left his face since the beginning of the cripple's recital, but he affected complete unconcern.

'Who said he intended to murder you, Lumas?' she asked levelly.

'Plowart here. If it hadn't been for him I would have been as ignorant of it as the time when he pushed me over the cliffs.'

'Who said Lachanell pushed you over the cliffs?'

'Plowart found out about that, too. Lachanell didn't expect me to find an ally like him,' Lumas said with a trace of satisfaction in his voice.

'I see. What happened next?'

'When he wouldn't open her door, I tried to break it down; but it was too strong. He ravished her while I waited outside,' he said tearfully. 'Do you blame me for anything that happened after that?'

'At dawn, the door opened and they came out together carrying her suitcases. I flung myself on him. Oh, I didn't mean to harm him! I just caught hold of his lapels and pleaded with him to leave me my wife. But, no, he wouldn't listen; he just tried to brush me aside and go down the stairs after her. I wouldn't loosen my grip though, and hung on to him with all my strength. Lachanell struggled to break free without hitting me, but I could see he wanted to by the flash of his eyes. At last he shouted: "Hang on as hard as death, then! We'll break our necks together!"'

'He rushed down the stairs with me swinging from his shoulders like a toy and getting banged from banister to wall as we went, tripping and falling the last steps to the hall. We stopped there because, for all his strength, he was exhausted.

'I clung on to him until I got my breath back, too. When I had, I started to plead with him again but that made him lose all patience and he dragged me in here where she was waiting for him. He yelled: "What are we going to do with him, then? Is he coming along with us? Tell him to take his hands off before I break my promise!"'

'She told me to let him go, and I did; but I took care I got between them and the windows! Lachanell was deadly calm

and said: "Get out of our way. Your wife is leaving you; you've batted on to her for the last time!"

'He started to come at me slowly and I snatched up a breadknife to frighten him. When he saw what I'd got, he went white and stopped walking. I thought I'd beaten him and started to taunt him. It was wrong, I see that now! I was just getting my revenge for all the humiliations I'd suffered through him. "Come on, Lachanell," I cried. "Let's see your courage!" Then something happened I hadn't counted on. My wife came in front of him and said: "Threaten as much as you like, Christopher, but I'm leaving you. If you want to use that knife, use it on me, for I'll not stay another hour with you."

'I lowered the knife feeling as if I'd been stabbed myself. Yes, in the deepest part of my entrails! As I looked at her, stupefied, she walked past me to the windows then turned back to this lover of hers and said: "Come along. He's only causing a scene".'

At this point Lumas began to snivel again and said brokenly: 'Forgive me for this, but she said something then that was unforgivable for a wife to say of her husband. She told him I'd lived on pity too long and I thrived on it. My own wife saying that!

'When she said that he threw his deformed head back and laughed uproariously. He thought she had finished me, as I was standing paralysed with the blade hanging down in my hand. As he walked past, I don't know what came over me but I turned and, as he slid his hairy hand around her waist, I plunged the knife into his back. It went in almost to the hilt. I jerked it out in a panic to undo the damage I'd done, but he began to turn around on me and I went mad. I stabbed him in the back again, and would have stabbed him a third time, but he caught the blade in his bare hand!

Lumas was trembling now and grimacing at the memory. 'I wrenched the knife free and it almost cut his hand in half and the blood came flying over all of us. He didn't even look

at those fingers of his, he just stared at me shrewdly (Yes, I remember his precise expression!) and, after a moment, started to tremble. It was then that he turned to her and whispered: "You see, I've kept my promise! Now, for God's sake, come with me before it's too late."

'He was swaying from side to side as they went over the terrace and I saw her put her arm around him, great tears bursting from her eyes when she looked back at me. She led him off through the garden and up to the cliffs. I started to go after them to beg their forgiveness, but I fell fainting on the terrace and didn't stir again until Plowart found me an hour ago.'

'If he's walking, he's still alive,' Plowart said unexpectedly. 'I'm going to look for him.' As he crossed the room, Claremont said clearly: 'What will you do when you've found him, Plowart?'

He turned with a sardonic smile, but the cripple saved him from answering. 'Bring him here, Plowart! Tell him he needn't be afraid of me any more and that I want to redeem myself.'

The girl stood up abruptly. 'I think I'll go with you,' she said. The impassivity of her face matched Plowart's.

'No. You look after Lumas. He's suffering from a bad shock and he needs help.'

'It's true,' Lumas said, nodding his head lugubriously. 'I've become unendurable to myself.'

'What can I do to help you?' Claremont asked, looking after Plowart as he closed the french windows behind him and set off through the garden.

Eleven

The bloodstains led in an almost continuous trail through the garden and along the cliff path. After two or three hundred yards he discovered a larger patch of crimson sand in a natural recess between three rocks. The sand around was scuffed and broken where Lachanell had evidently sat down to rest. If he had come so far the tomato grower's condition was not as serious as Lumas had suggested, but the brightness of the stains indicated internal injuries, bearing out what the cripple had said about the depth of his stabs.

Plowart squatted on his heels, frowning. Although the man was abnormally strong, no amount of brute strength could resist the sapping effect of serious wounds. There was the possibility, of course, that the woman was taking most of his weight, but for how long could she do that?

He stood up and was about to go on when his eye was caught by a bundle, cast aside off the path. Plowart walked over and lifted it from the grass. It was the jacket Lachanell had been wearing when he had come to the bedroom door the night before.

Plowart twisted it slowly and, examining the back of the garment, found two jagged incisions close to the main seam running down between the shoulders. Around these tears the cloth was saturated with blood. The cuff of the left sleeve was similarly stained, presumably from the man's lacerated hand, and the left pocket, where the hand had apparently rested against his side, was so impregnated that it was almost rigid.

With this corroboration of Lumas' tale, he was unable to understand how Lachanell could still be on his feet. From the position of the tears the man should have been dead within a

few minutes of the steel entering him. One of the thrusts had cut through the seam directly over the spine, yet he was still alive!

Plowart delved into the inside pocket and brought out a bundle of letters which he thumbed through quickly. The last in the bundle was the one Lachanell had confiscated. He set a match to the pages and, when the flames had narrowed their circle almost to his fingers, released the remnants. That was the end of the tangible evidence, then; now there was only the memory to be destroyed.

Plowart moved on, scrutinising the ground for other clues with the jacket over his arm. A hundred yards further on he found signs of another rest, but he did not delay the pursuit with a close examination. The man's steadily deteriorating condition was becoming obvious, both from the increasing amount of blood he was leaving behind and by the shortening distances between resting places; the third halt was a mere thirty yards from the one before. A short distance away, the blood led to the cliff-side and speckled a winding path to the shore, fifty feet below.

Plowart picked his way down easily, but the descent must have represented a grim effort to a man in Lachanell's weakened state. The path led to a large, almost flat slab of rock projecting over the sea. It was spattered with blood. He looked about him but found no further traces. He stood on the slab nonplussed, then, with only one possible explanation left, he crawled to the edge of the rock and peered over. As he had expected, there was a cavity below, but it contained only shadowed water, and he pulled himself back.

The water lapping under and around the rock was an evil marine green that took nothing from the sky for its colouring. Far out to sea a line of five rocks broke the surface of the water, but there was nothing else. It was at this point of perplexity that Claremont came to join him. He turned at the rustle of her skirt and she said quickly: 'What has happened to them?'

He shrugged irritably, then pointed to a dark fleck at the

edge of the rock. 'That's the last trace of him,' he said. 'They've either gone into the water or had a boat berthed here, and I fancy it's the former. They probably went into the water to break the trail and swam further down the shore somewhere.'

'Why should they do that?' she asked, bewildered.

'There's no logic to it. The first instinct of wounded animals is to hide.'

As he was speaking, Plowart emptied the pockets of Lachanell's jacket on to the slab. 'He abandoned it not far from the house,' he explained briefly.

The inside of one of the pockets was ripped and everything in it had fallen into the lining and worked around the hem, so that he had to knead it inch by inch before he was sure he had missed nothing.

The collection of items finally laid out was a schoolboy's assortment of odds and ends. A wallet, which Plowart had found in the inside pocket, contained a few banknotes, some loose coins, a local Labour Party membership card and miscellaneous documents. Apart from the letters, the rest of the collection was made up of a corkscrew, a silver penknife with the initials 'B. L.' inscribed upon it, three pencil stubs, two soiled handkerchiefs, one heavily bloodstained, five cigarettes in a crumpled packet, a box of matches, a golden cockerel that looked as if it had been wrenched off a charm bracelet, a small compass and finally, a woman's lipstick in a metal case.

Plowart turned this last item over curiously. 'What's he doing with a lipstick?' he exclaimed.

She reached over and took it from him. When she tested the cosmetic against the back of her hand it was oily and soft. 'Look how bright it is,' she said. 'He wanted to see her as gay and feminine.'

Plowart shook his head, puzzled. 'I've never seen her wearing lipstick,' he said. 'Nor any powder or mascara, for that matter.'

She sheathed the lipstick and handed it back to him. 'No, he obviously kept it for her and she only used it when she was with him. Would Lumas object to it, do you suppose?'

'Probably,' he said indifferently. 'He's a colourless swine who'd have everyone as dull as himself. She dug her own grave when she married him.'

When Plowart started to unfold the letters and read them she protested indignantly, but he waved her to silence. After a few minutes he looked up and said: 'She must have intended this to be the last time they met. Look, here's a half-dozen letters from him bound up in pink ribbon and addressed for collection at the Siren. She would only have returned them if she meant to end the affaire, surely?'

Before she could stop him, he was reading the first of them aloud swiftly:

"Dearest Heart,

Oh, My Darling, how slowly the days pull themselves along when I don't see you. Sometimes I feel I'll sail in one night and you'll be gone—there'll be no more of you. I don't have to tell you of the terrible holes in my heart if you leave me. It is past all words. It's no use telling you how much I want you, and I cannot in letters, but you'll know me by more than words although I'm not as clever as you are. When other men think I'm strong they show themselves up to be fools, because half my strength has gone to you, and it's with you all the time, for I only have all my strength when we're together. Only another two months my dearest, sweetest darling and we'll be in the stars again. Until then I'm only mechanical."

'Well, what do you think of that?' he said, putting it down. 'That's the most ponderous, ungraceful love letter I've ever read. In fact, it's so clumsy that a woman would have to love him to accept such nonsense.'

'How can you be so cruel!' Claremont cried, snatching the bundle from him and stuffing it into her blouse. 'Only you

could be heartless enough to read someone's love letters and make such cold comments. They weren't written as an academic exercise. Any woman would be proud to have them for their sincerity alone!

'They sound more like the effusions of a sick adolescent than a man in his right mind,' Plowart said. 'He didn't have much practice, I agree, if those letters are all he ever sent her. Six letters in as many years could hardly be called a memorable correspondence, could it?'

Claremont, hot in defence of the absent lover, said passionately: 'A single phrase is sufficient for a woman. If you penned a few love letters I don't think any of your polished phrases would win a woman more effectively than these would. Their very pain and laboriousness makes them more valuable than any stylist's handiwork!'

Plowart said: 'Well, I wouldn't write love letters, so that ends the comparison. But even if I did,' he chuckled, 'I certainly couldn't be more prophetic than Lachanell. What does he say: "The terrible holes in my heart if you leave me?" It would have been more accurate to say if he did not leave her!'

She said contemptuously: 'You think love is ludicrous, don't you? But do you think selfishness is strength?'

'To have full possession of oneself is the only way to become strong, yes,' he said. 'You can't argue that point because you believe it yourself with a few more reservations than I allow. The only kind of love that has any dignity and decency is the kind that is withheld until the blind man can throw away his stick. Unless its purpose is to help us to greater spiritual health, it's superfluous to the human destiny and I don't want it.'

She said with sudden forlornness: 'It's not a case of wanting it or not wanting it; it's a matter of having it or not having it.'

The significance of her reply was lost on him, because he had already picked up another letter, separate from those in the bundle. He scanned the first lines and looked up with astonishment. 'Here's a surprise,' he said. 'This is from the woman.'

What a contrast to Lachanell's efforts! According to the date he kept this one tucked away in his pocket for two years:

“Poor Firebird,

Ours, it seems, is a strange and broken happiness that has as little health in its past as in its future. When I sit alone in my room in the lonely afternoons, I imagine it as a rare and beautiful fish from the depths, that breaks the surface of the ocean only four times a year for a gulp of air, each time knowing this breath of further life is its time of pain. Always, when our fish comes up, something is done to it that sends it down with yet another wound. I cannot think how the fish will continue to take its breath, knowing the punishment that is invariably waiting. Perhaps it will die, preferring the dignity of the dark to the anguish of the light.

“This seems to be our fate, that our love prevails only when it is submerged and unconsummated. During these years of loving, every ecstasy we have experienced has involved some subtle damage. But I should not talk about this, for I know how it pains you; and particularly so when there is nothing to be done that can remedy it. There cannot be anything more miserable than to know that the recriminations, insults and rancour that our ecstasies provoke are all fully justified and cannot be repudiated. The victim, the scourge and the torturer are not different forces but simply separate positions in the hall of love; all so easily interchangeable as each year proves. They are separate lashes joined to the same shaft and only space divides them. So, as my husband is insufferably damned in his unhappiness, we are damned in our happiness. Our satisfactions are no greater and no less, for we are all steadily losing and, in honesty, there's not a winner among us.

“I have reached a time, my darling, when I dread your arrival while I'm tortured by your absence! As soon as I know you are coming, I communicate the fact as clearly as if I shouted it through every shadowed room of this house,

and I see my husband die a little more, watching my every movement and pretending—Oh, so hard!—that he does not care. As each day brings your approach closer, I radiate happiness more intensely and his pain and bewilderment flower more fully. On the precise day you arrive his grief explodes upon my head as my happiness spills through the house, each missing the other's mind by a thousand years! Don't try to answer this and worry your poor head, my dearest, for your silence is more eloquent than any voice and you must know by now that in your silence I find my peace."'

When he had finished, he looked up and said: 'Now isn't theirs the strangest matching? I can't imagine anything more grotesque!'

'I suspect that everything is grotesque to you,' she remarked. Without waiting for his reply, she said: 'Unless we find them soon, he'll die. I hope she has the sense to take him to a place where he can have treatment. But somehow I don't think she will.'

Seeing that she did not intend to delay the search he got to his feet and, stuffing the letters, together with the other articles, back into the jacket, threw it down.

'We'll soon find him,' he said. 'It won't take long to circle this island of yours. He can't have got very far after losing so much blood.'

They set off along the shore in silence. . . .

After an hour of walking, when they were approaching the end of a complete circuit of Vachau, they breasted a promontory and saw a slim blue sailing boat, moored a few yards off the shore. The girl was about to go down to it when he gripped her arm excitedly. 'Don't go into the open,' he murmured. 'That's probably his boat. Lumas told me he had one. Unless I'm very much mistaken this is where he'll make for when he recovers a little—if he does! We'll keep among these rocks with our heads down, so that we can't be seen.'

Claremont stared at him. 'Why should we hide? I thought we intended to help him. Or have you another idea, Plowart?'

She tried to wrench free of his detaining hand, but his fingers tightened. As their eyes met and locked, Plowart said in a low voice: 'He's not as badly hurt as you think. He's foxing, that's all! As soon as he gets back some of his strength he'll try to make a dash for Guernsey aboard that boat. Why else did he go down to that slab of rock and into the water if it wasn't to shake off pursuit?'

Claremont looked at him almost with agony. 'What pursuit? What are you talking about, Plowart?'

Plowart tightened his grip even more and said fiercely: 'It's me he's afraid of, if you want the truth. He knows that I can't let him live while he's in a position to destroy me. That's why he's dragged himself so far and why the woman has helped him. They think that between them they can still win the game, if they play it cleverly enough.'

He pulled her down forcibly behind a large rock. 'It won't be for long,' he said with grim satisfaction as he folded his jacket as a cushion for her. 'If he delays too long he won't have the stamina to sail as far as Guernsey.'

She said quietly: 'So this is the reason you incited Lumas against Lachanell. A tool!'

'They're all worthless: the husband, the wife and her lover. Lachanell had no scruples about blackmailing me when he stole a letter of mine, so why should I have any mercy for him? He imagined he'd tamed me, but now he's finding out his mistake.'

While her face whitened as she listened to him, Plowart said conversationally, his eyes intent on the boat and occasionally flickering over the rocky shoreline: 'But I was wrong about him, too. When I first met him I couldn't discover a single good quality. He seemed as bad as Lumas and I couldn't understand why she selected him in preference to her husband. But now I see her reasoning. She saw his indestructibility. Who else could have taken so much punishment and stayed

alive so long? That's the test of a man above everything else; how much and how long it takes to destroy him.'

'You're wrong to place such a value on the preservation of a body,' she said, aiming to divert him from his vigil. 'In itself it's meaningless, compared with what it contains. And what it contains needs no human effort for its preservation.'

Plowart laughed ironically. 'Here you are presenting me with a religious argument when all I'm interested in is the body's survival—a biological problem, nothing more. What you say is not only a travesty of my ideas but a complete retreat from them. Who wants to speak of immortality in terms of soul, essence and what have you? No practical man, I assure you! Do you think that our friend Lachanell really cares whether there's an after-life just now? Not if it can't accommodate his carnal appetites! Take him from a woman's bed, take his arms from a woman's waist and his lips from a woman's ear, and you've lost the essential Lachanell! No, this immortality of yours is a glorification of destruction and nothing else! I don't care a hang for it.'

'You can only be so positive about destruction because you produce it wherever you go,' she replied bitterly. 'I imagine that everything you have ever touched has been destroyed almost immediately.'

'Yes, it's true,' he said in a low voice. 'Everything but my integrity. If things rip when I pull them, then they're rotten: illusions every one of them. Do you think a vacuum is not a lonely place? No one could bear it unless he cared passionately for real values.'

Claremont shook her head vehemently. 'Don't try to win my sympathy! That vacuum of yours ceases to have a chill as soon as it is entered!'

'You're quite right,' Plowart said. 'We are suffering, all of us, because of the emptiness that surrounds us, that infiltrates between us, that penetrates through us. We are penned in by our limitations, afraid to break out and face that emptiness alone. But unless we do, we shall go on making our mistakes,

repeating our blunders and manufacturing the same, senseless tragedies. It's my destiny to lead the way! Do you think I'll sacrifice that for a miserable state execution? Lachanell threatens my success. Let him drop one monosyllable in the wrong place, give one significant wink, the merest gesture, and humanity will have lost in me one of its rarest specimens—a fanatic!

'Bourcey threatened me from another direction: I built a political movement to throw down the government and set in its place an inspired, disinterested intellectual leadership. But he was indifferent to my aims. He meant to use the party for his own ends: to milk it—with his own lieutenants, self-seekers the lot of them, and hostesses to dilute it with silly social chatter, scandals of personality and intrigues. I killed him in the name of the rising generations!'

With increasing passion, he said: 'I shall murder five hundred men with my bare hands, with rusty hatchets, with garrotting wires, with guns, knives and poisons and stain my soul so red it's past all your religious redemptions—if it will make our species great! And when Lachanell is dead, I shall deal with Purchamp. He shan't bait me like a low criminal!'

'He has gone,' she said with a sudden effort.

'Gone? No, surely not! He wouldn't give up the glittering prospect of ruining me after the boredom of cattle thefts and dock brawls?'

'I meant that he's gone back to Guernsey to get a search warrant,' Claremont said. 'He told me he had tried to break into Lumas' house three times, but all the doors were bricked in and all the windows barred. He is going to report that the house has been turned into a fortress.'

'Then that's the last we will see of him! By the time he comes back I shall be gone,' Plowart said. 'He was a fool to think he was up to dealing with anything more than petty pilfering.'

'He wasn't such a fool as you think, Plowart! He told me you were the type merciless enough to kill scores of people and clever enough to escape justice. I retorted that I was sure you

could never kill anyone, unless the circumstances were quite exceptional.' She added in a lowered voice: 'I did not expect to find he was right as quickly as I have.'

Plowart made an angry gesture. 'Don't blame me for your own blindness! Why are all your ideals like those of everyone else? Do you seriously think that pain, violence and cruelty are paramount evils? Find the reason behind them and you will understand the need for stoicism; a determination not only to transcend them, but actually to swallow them up and digest them. It's only when suffering is truly meaningless, without any purpose, that it becomes a blasphemy against existence. But if a sharp blow in the face cures the blindness of a musician, isn't the violence worthwhile? When the marks of the blow are gone and the tears have dried, would your musician complain of the blow? No, suffering, if it has a purpose, some sense—however dimly seen—loses its evil. It ceases to be suffering.

'People condemn violence either because they lack the insight to grasp its significance, or because they're not capable of imagining more profound evils. Unless the reason behind violence is understood, it's nothing but brutality. Oh, I can see the logic of the other ways of thinking. But it's blindness all the same. Blame the blindness of the observer, not the violence of the aggressor!'

She listened to him intently and, when he drew breath, interrupted him spiritedly, a flush of anger in her cheeks. 'You talk too glibly, Plowart. Would you like suffering to go back into the curriculum of schools? So that teachers can flog a boy to teach him some absurd proposition like: "Look, I'm flaying the flesh off your back although you've done nothing to deserve it. If you think carefully between each stroke, you'll see that injustice and misunderstanding are the most powerful forces governing the world today. If they weren't, I should not have the authority to flog you"!'

Plowart, highly amused by her interpretation, threw his head back and laughed unaffectedly.

'No, don't laugh,' she said fiercely. 'What I want to say is this. Yes, possibly as a direct consequence of that flogging the boy may triumph over all others in understanding the ways of the world. He may become a millionaire, a pope, the founder of an industrial dynasty with influence over half of Europe through just that lesson. I won't deny it. But that school master can flog an innocent pupil, to teach him the workings of injustice, only provided he himself hasn't the least idea of the pain he inflicts. Only someone grossly unimaginative would resort to such educational methods. The lesson is: if we are to kill, we must be sure we know what dying means. If we are to have flogging, let it be done by someone who has been flogged and knows the pain, humiliation and outrage each stroke means. Nobody who has known pain can talk of dispensing it for educative purposes. That's what I mean!'

Plowart said slowly: 'And do you honestly think I don't? Pain has made me what I am! Talk about violence to a man or woman who hasn't lived with it, breathed it, slept with it and eaten it three times a day, and you'll find they'll all disclaim it. It's inhuman, they say. When you hear someone say that, you can look at them hard because you've a perfect specimen of a fool in front of you! Next, look at the men and women whose very lives are built around violence . . . surgeons, nurses, psychiatrists, vets, soldiers . . . and you'll see in all of them an ability to go beyond it. When a scream of agony goes up, they don't gag the lips for offending their sensibility; they kill or cure the flesh, depending on whether we speak of a field marshal or a doctor. When an unnecessary war is being prolonged beyond endurance, you don't quibble about shooting a sniper from an oak tree, even if you know without a shadow of doubt that the young man up there in the branches is a young idealist, another Rupert Brooke. Yes, you shoot him down, and a hundred thousand like him, if need be, because they obstruct the road leading to that hostile capital where the coals burn reddest in the demand for a never-ending war.

'When you talk about pain, suffering or agony, pray that

there will be someone who can walk on without stopping, because he is the one who must seize the root and pull it up!

'When Lachanell comes over those rocks and tries to board that boat I shall kill him. I tell you this quite matter-of-factly. Because I can kill him, do you seriously think I shan't suffer doing it?'

Claremont shook her head bitterly. 'No, by your own reasoning you won't. The suffering will have meaning, so you won't suffer!'

He refused to allow his own argument to be used against him. 'You've mistaken my meaning as usual! Everything I say and do smacks of brutality and hypocrisy, isn't that so?'

She nodded, coldly averting her eyes.

Without looking at her, he said: 'Well, I don't need the support of anyone! The test is whether society has anyone strong enough to stop my race to power.'

All through this conversation he had kept his eyes fixed firmly on the shore close to the boat, and now his gaze narrowed and became concentrated on one point. He stopped speaking abruptly. Claremont looked around quickly and could not make out, at first, what had captured his attention. When her eyes moved up the sloping face of the cliff, however, she saw the figure of Mrs Lumas picking her way slowly down to the level of the sea. She was moving quite mechanically, apparently oblivious of the dangers of a sudden fall. Once or twice she lost her footing and lurched precariously, but she recovered herself more by luck than judgement and continued her way down. Claremont scanned the cliff rapidly and was relieved to see that the woman had come alone.

As soon as Anne Lumas reached the edge of the water, she took off her shoes, waded out to the boat, and pulled herself over the side. She ducked out of sight and then reappeared within a few minutes with her arms full of clothes, which she deposited to one side until she was back in the water. Then, taking them up, she carried her load back to the rocks. On the way one of the garments fell into the water and she had to

return to retrieve it. As it spread itself out on the quiet surface of the water, it was revealed as a woman's frock.

'Hallo!' Plowart exclaimed. 'She seems to be getting back some of her wardrobe. What's the meaning of that, I wonder?' His forehead furrowed in thought, then he muttered: 'Bandages! She's going to rip them up for him! Can you see him anywhere above? He must be lying somewhere quite close.'

'No,' she answered curtly. 'And if I could, I shouldn't tell you.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, with a return to that strange gentleness which had surprised her once before. 'You seem determined we are enemies.'

Mrs Lumas had carried her clothes halfway up the cliff by now, but just as Plowart tensed, preparing to follow her, she set them down and retraced her steps. He sank down again beside the girl. The woman walked slowly towards the group of rocks where they were concealed. Plowart's face was impassive. Only his eyes moved, measuring the distance closing between him and discovery.

But Mrs Lumas found what she was seeking before she reached their hiding place. She bent down, picked up a large lump of rock, and staggered back along the shore grasping it with both hands. Twice on the way she had to put it down to rest. When she came abreast of the boat she waded out and with the last of her strength threw the heavy rock down into the boat. The craft rocked wildly from side to side under the sudden weight, but she steadied it and clambered aboard.

She worked swiftly now: untying the halyards, she ran up the boat's red sail, and then moved forward to where the rock lay. Plowart and Claremont watched her lift the rock high above her head and dash it down on the planks of the boat.

The sound of snapping wood came to them distinctly across the quiet of the cove, and the boat pitched and plunged furiously like a tethered horse savagely gouged by the rowels. The woman was thrown down, but got up immediately and stared at the damage she had done. It was obviously

enough, because she turned and walking aft, unbuckled the narrow cloth belt of her frock and used it to lash the rudder. She then raised the small anchor and laid it inside the boat. This done, she jumped back into the water, and the craft began to move out gently to the open sea.

Plowart watched the woman and the boat separate, one back to the shore and the other away from the Island.

As soon as she reached the shore, Anne Lumas turned and watched the craft sailing away, her red sail billowing bravely and a large hole in her bottom. She buried her face in her hands for a moment and her shoulders drooped; then, as suddenly as she had given way to her dejection, she recovered herself and, straightening, turned away resolutely and started to climb the cliff.

He said impatiently: 'What the devil's she up to? She's smashed his only way out. We'll have to follow her to discover why.'

Watching the woman going over the crest of the cliff, Claremont said: 'Don't you see? He doesn't need the boat now. He is dead.'

'Nonsense,' he retorted. 'She's hidden him somewhere, that's all.'

Claremont shook her head. 'She's going back to her husband.'

He regarded her questioningly. 'What makes you think that?'

Claremont said simply: 'She has destroyed the boat. I wondered when we saw those last bloodstains on the edge of the water but, now I know. He died on that slab of rock we stood upon, and she pushed him over into the water before going somewhere to think alone. Her problem was whether she should leave her husband and Vachau, or stay and win some sort of peace for herself by offering her husband what had formerly belonged to Lachanell. But she made her choice when she pushed her lover's body into the water. A woman usually acts in advance of her reasoning.'

Plowart listened sceptically. 'Why smash his boat?'

'It was the only evidence that Lachanelli has not left Vachau. She ran up the sail so that it will sink far out in deep water, where it can't be found. She will swear on any bible that he left Vachau unharmed. When they miss him at Guernsey, it will be presumed his boat foundered in bad weather.

'By smashing the boat she has made her husband an innocent man; that is, so long as he holds his tongue! She has probably already told herself that one dead man does not justify a second, and the killing was exonerated by love. Do you remember what she said in that love letter about all their lives running from the same shaft, and the three of them being only separate lashes? That's the way her poor bewildered mind is running now.'

Considering this, he nodded slowly. 'You are right; I should have seen it before. She wouldn't wreck his boat if he were still alive. I'm sorry for all three of them, despite what you might think about my sincerity. But the whole affaire was unnecessary and sordid from the beginning and I can't see why it was ever begun.' He meditated for a moment, then said with a smile: 'But at least it relieves me of the job of making good Lumas' mess.'

'Lumas? Will you dare say it was he who murdered Lachanell?' She stood up and watched him broodingly as he also rose. 'If there were a doctrine of intention, Plowart, you would emerge as his murderer, not that fumbling old man!'

Plowart's jacket was heavily creased from its service as a cushion. He inspected it carefully and pulled it over his shoulders before saying: 'Can't you see what I'm trying to do, even now? I thought you would understand me better than anyone else, but I am beginning to realise that you are closer to other people than I first thought. Are you only pretending not to understand? You had no difficulty in seeing that woman's motives, so why do you have difficulty in understanding mine? There's no difference between her actions today and mine on every day.'

'I would have said there was a great difference,' she said, wondering if this were another example of his habitual irony.

'No, she and I are the same today! She has walked past the violence her husband inflicted on Lachanell to a point where she recognised the cause. In the recognition lies her forgiveness. Lachanell's death, her husband's guilt, her grief . . . they are all branded products from the same factory: Love. Grief-stricken as she is at Lachanell's death, she nevertheless vindicates both her husband and his deed. He has struck at the core of her pity with the very knife that killed her lover, because it has made her realise that his love goes beyond mere whining, snivelling and pleading. She has reached an ultimate compassion that rises above pain, just as Christ did when he said: "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!"

'Well, that's exactly what I'm trying to do. To rise above pain and see beyond it. The average man is so dominated by pain that he can't think about anything else. Our whole species has no idea where it's going and, lacking leaders, it's going nowhere. Without direction, a sense of purpose, man's supreme intellectual state is doubt, and doubt means indecision and decay. Divorce a man from purpose and his life becomes meaningless, no better than an animal's. The trouble is that most purposes are exhausted too quickly; the only ones capable of enduring are those sustained by belief. The medieval church knew that stout walls were needed to block out the horrifying vacuum of the universe. It understood that the recognition of that vacuum was enough to send weak human beings, cursed with imagination, to insanity and suicide. That was why the Church demanded absolute obedience.

'The first dissenters, then, were spreaders of hysteria; they were racked, branded and burned at the stake. The Church was stopping what it honestly considered was the beginning of a stampede by shooting dead the foremost to save the rest.

'That's why I've trained myself to walk through pain. Does it matter what is happening on the fringes when one is aiming for the core, the boiling centre of the trouble? Humanity

will no longer be lost and leaderless when I reach supreme power. I shall take the wheel of Mankind's charabanc and steer it ruthlessly down the curling road to the terminal of belief, where men will be given the strength to swallow all conceivable suffering and not cry out. Today, we only feel pain; tomorrow, the world will understand why it has pain. On that day pain will be abolished!

She listened with a growing sense of fear, walking a little ahead of him. He was so adamant that her last doubts about his sincerity were lost; but in their place came the picture of a lop-sided, destructive force lacking the compass-bearing to guide it to creation. For the first time she saw how closely the product of a Frankenstein overlapped the saint, but she simply said: 'I don't see how that affects Mrs Lumas. She may exonerate her husband, but that doesn't wipe away her grief. It will be with her for ever.

'Exactly where you're wrong,' he said decisively. 'By disposing of Lachanell's body she declared, in effect: "There is no death; only life. My husband is my only lover." She may not believe that today, but ultimately she will.

'By living with her husband and allowing him her bed every night, she will be steadily piling the bricks of belief until there is a solid wall about her. As the years go by and the wall grows higher, it will block out the past exactly as the walls of the medieval church blocked out the frightening vastness of the universe and set in its place the name "Heaven". If you go to that woman in twenty years and say: "Lachanell is outside waiting to take you in his arms again," she won't jump to her feet and fly to the door, I promise you. She will only repeat: "Lachanell . . . Lachanell . . . Lachanell" as though she can only remember a certain familiarity about the play of the syllables, but nothing more.

'And there would be no point in crying out with rage: "He was your lover, Woman! The big body that lay in your bed and whispered sweet things in your ear on many a starry night! You don't forget; you only lie!" That would be wrong, for she

will not remember deeply and poignantly as the Romantics would have us think; she will have built a wall between herself and Hell. If she cannot build that wall, then she will become part of the chaos and die or go mad.'

They took a dozen steps in silence, Plowart with his head bent and his jaw moving slowly, as if he were masticating the words he had spoken, and she with her face broodingly white and compressing her lips. Then, as if recalled to the moment by a deliberate effort of will, he looked up and said soberly: 'We must build that wall, Claremont, or we shall all go mad or die. It is not for strong people, like you or me, but for weak people that we must think. What does it matter if a few hundred fools like Bourcey and Lachanell fall into the foundations? It's built in the name of all humanity, not just one or two isolated specimens. If you think I'm ruthless because I go past the crying of women and children, remember that the torment of the world reduces the sorrows of the individual to insignificance. It's no use offering a shoulder for them to cry on. No, we must drive into the heart of pain and end it for ever.'

Claremont said wearily: 'You talk as if you are God, Plowart.' When he was about to retort angrily, she held up her hand. 'Don't speak yet. No, you're not God and you're not even a passable imitation. You're in no way god-like because you lack the real power, the power you have asked me to help you find. Yes, you have power of a sort. You can walk past both pity and suffering, but imperviousness isn't strength; it's only a protection against being tempted off the main road. You say you'll take the wheel of humanity's charabanc and drive it to belief. You neglect to say you haven't any idea of what total belief means. Who will trust himself to a driver who knows neither the road nor the destination?'

He was about to interrupt but she again gestured him to be silent. 'You admitted that the other day! Your whole purpose in acquiring power is merely to keep yourself at the proper tension—those were your words—to exercise the

apparatus of the visionary, you said, until the time when your vision arrives. But your vision is still withheld, isn't it? Although you talk of building a wall to protect us all from the emptiness of the sky, you don't specify how you'll build it without mortar. You're presumptuous, and that's worse . . .' she hesitated, then added vindictively: 'Much worse than your ruthlessness.'

Plowart said calmly: 'The definitive act of the visionary is to presume his revelation will come inevitably. I have done what Anne Lumas did: pushed the body into the water before I knew why I had to. You may doubt all you want, Claremont, but rely on it, I shall find what I'm looking for, finally, with or without your help. When nature is confronted with an insatiable animal of my kind, she quickly hands over whatever is wanted, hoping her fingers won't be bitten in the process.'

Twelve

As they walked back along the shore, leaving the cover behind them, the lowering sun sent shafts of scarlet across the water almost to their feet and turned the small pools among the rocks into beds of fire. Claremont said passionately: 'Then you'll keep on killing!'

Plowart made a gesture of exasperation. 'Do you think I've nothing better to do than kill? Haven't I explained, I'm out to cure the world?'

'Yes, but you'll keep on killing to do it!' she retorted. 'You'll keep on killing until you are shown the futility of violence. You commit murder in the name of human salvation and preach a doctrine of inhumanity that directly contradicts itself! Can nothing less than a miracle persuade you to stop, Plowart?'

'Nothing less than a miracle!' he said triumphantly. 'But wasn't that what you promised me if I climbed down to your White Feather? Show me how to concentrate my power and I shall cease to look on other men as a danger. But while I'm comparatively weak I must take precautions against them.'

She looked at him consideringly. 'Then you will be able to kill them more heartlessly than you can now.'

'Why do you doubt me?' he asked wonderingly.

'Because you can make vileness a virtue so easily! Your kind of thinking can relate eugenics and incinerators and make them part of a perfectly sane argument; isn't that enough to make one suspicious? How many Bourceys and Lachanells have there been in your life? Shall I help you find more power when you're already capable of so much damage? No, Plowart,

I want an assurance from you first. Give me your solemn vow that you'll kill no more!

'My dear Claremont,' Plowart said kindly, 'when compassion is taken to its conclusion it has a terrifying radiance. Those closest to it and blinded will say it is pitiless, of course. But there is nothing more ramshackle or hopeless than pity that stops horrified on the threshold of the world and does nothing more to halt the carnage than apply bandages and ointments to the few lying nearest. If you want an oath from me, then I'll solemnly swear to you that, after Christ, I am the most compassionate man God has set on earth. With that knowledge, and despite what you and others may think of me, I rest quiet in my conscience and my heart. I can give you no greater assurance than that.'

'No, I can see that,' she said with sadness. 'Very well, if you come with me I'll show you just what you want.'

She turned and went ahead, walking rapidly. Plowart looked after her without moving for a moment, then he followed her with his eyes growing brilliant with anticipation. After the antagonism she had shown when he had revealed his intention of finishing Lachanell off, Plowart had given up hope of Claremont fulfilling her promise.

She led him down the shore, jumping from rock to rock with the lithe agility of one born to the island. Finally, she halted and said: 'This is the place!'

The girl had brought him to a part of the shore that was immediately familiar. They had stopped in front of the blood-stained slab where Anne Lumas had pushed Lachanell into the water. He noticed that the tide had already submerged the rock under six inches of water and from the blood stains small threads of red were rising and drifting away. The tomato-grower's jacket, which he had thrown down was waterlogged and inching towards the edge of the slab. 'The place for what?' he inquired.

'A revelation!' Claremont answered calmly. 'You thought you could get what you wanted by mental and physical

disciplines, but a revelation, in my experience, is sometimes a simple question of geography.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' Plowart said curtly.

'I mean there are some places where nature works at some acute inner strain and breaks all the principles she formulates elsewhere. The effect is that one sees what appear to be miraculous events in these places. Lourdes is an example of it, I suppose, although most of the people who go there have already prepared themselves to be convinced, so one can't be sure. Well, here is another!' She smiled at his intent face and said: 'I hope I'm making myself a little clearer?'

'Perfectly. Go on,' he commanded.

'Unlike the pilgrims who go to Lourdes, I had no suspicion at all about what was going to happen to me, so I had an open mind. Perhaps too open!' she laughed. She pointed out to sea, still laughing, and said: 'Do you see those five rocks set in a chain?'

Plowart nodded. They were the rocks he had noticed when he had come looking for Lachanell. Lying just off the path of the sun and about two miles out from the island, they stood above the scarlet-washed water with the hooded significance of a religious procession. Around their bases the water was boiling and breaking spray almost as high as the rocks.

'The waters between where we are standing and those rocks are notorious because the fastest cross-currents of the Channel Isles meet here. A swimmer caught in them has no chance of escape; he is either dragged under or torn to pieces on the rocks.

'I was suicidally silly when I was fifteen, and one hot day I swam out to the rocks to prove the swim could be done. The currents lived up to their reputation! I was caught in them all right, but just as I was on the point of being pulled under, those rocks began to advance on me, one after the other, dipping and rising out of the water like a school of whales with the thunder of huge masses in motion. The moment I saw them moving, a superhuman force lifted me through the currents

and carried me on to the rocks. I lay on the first one for hours, half-senseless with ecstasy, until a boat took me off. In that ecstasy I experienced revelations I would not even try to convey to you.

'I've swum out several times since, and the same thing has happened; just as I'm succumbing to the currents, the rocks move, unleashing forces within me I've known nothing about. Each time the revelations of that ecstasy have deepened and intensified.

'Well, that is my power, Plowart! If you're willing to trust your life to the rocks, then it's yours too. Are you game?'

Watching that line of rocks in the sun-reddened water, he said: 'Yes, of course! It will be dark soon.'

As he was pulling off his clothes he noticed Claremont was undressing, too. 'There's no need for you to come,' he said. 'I can look after myself.'

Claremont ignored him and removed the rest of her clothes. When they were naked, they stood together on the rock with the water lapping around their ankles and shivering slightly as a breeze touched their flesh. The slopes and hollows of the water before them looked evilly cold, but the prospect of what lay ahead fired him with excitement.

Claremont glanced at him and said: 'Ready?' At his nod she dived cleanly and disappeared in a spout of flying spray that showered over him. Wiping the water from his eyes, he took a step forward. It sent him over the edge of the slab and he went straight down. The shock knocked all the breath from his lungs and he kicked his way to the surface and floundered there for a moment cursing.

The girl had already surfaced about fifteen feet in front and he came up beside her using a powerful overarm stroke. She turned to give him a quick smile, then resumed swimming with steady strokes, making a direct line for the rocks. Not very far out they ran into a floating island of seaweed. Claremont dived shallowly and swam underwater until she was past it, but Plowart chose to battle through it. The strands writhed

around his arms and chest, impeding his strokes, and he ended by ripping them off in angry handfuls, as if the seaweed were another antagonist.

When he was free of it, he rolled over on to his back and saw that they were passing from the shadow of the most outlying of Vachau's promontories. Down its length small crocodiles of lights bobbed and turned. He trod water, wondering what was happening, until she swam back for him. 'Come on! It will be dark soon,' she said, her teeth chattering.

From the extreme tip of the promontory above a couple of figures pointed down at them. One cupped his hands to his mouth and the words: 'Treacherous water! Turn back!' reached them.

'Come along!' she exclaimed, not bothering to look up.

As they turned away, matching stroke for stroke, he said: 'They're looking for Lachanell already.'

After a few moments she said: 'Lumas must have told someone before she could stop him. But he may still be able to talk his way out of it.'

The water was all fire about them, now. Every handful they displaced cascaded like running flames, cloudy and opalescent, and the sun was so low on the horizon it struck them in the eyes whenever they looked up.

About a quarter of a mile out the sea began to buffet them and the current made itself felt. At first it was no more than a tickle upon the legs, but within a few yards they were being wrenched away from their path.

Claremont drew closer to him and when her body was alongside panted: 'Everything I said untrue. Sorry! Rocks don't move . . . afraid . . . nor ever will! I came, too, . . . as penance . . .'. She spoke between heavy gasps because the current was becoming stronger, sapping them of all resistance.

An expression of fury crossed his face and he tried to turn back, but the current was too strong. She watched his struggles with pain on her face, and gasped: 'You forced me to! You'd go on killing . . .'

He did not listen to her, and after a few more strokes they had reached the end of their endurance and the current bore them out to sea helplessly, half a mile wide of the rocks. Plowart glanced over at them weakly. The water in his eyes was making everything misty, but through them he saw the line of rocks trembling. Yes, the rocks were plainly rising and falling majestically! They were turning and moving towards them in the open sea!

'They're coming!' he screamed. 'The rocks! They're coming for us!'

She looked around despairingly, but the rocks were motionless. When she turned to him, he was already shearing through the water with the maniacal determination of a machine, as if the current did not exist. Seeing him disappear, she cried out, but the words were choked by a sob. As the sob left her, she was pulled down swiftly as though some monster under the surface had seized her legs. Her going left scarcely a ripple. Only a deepening whiteness, replaced within seconds by the covering black depths, marked her descent.

Plowart swam ecstatically, throwing plumes of water away from him as his arms rotated in and out of the water with the fury of one possessed. As he lanced forward, it seemed impossible that the current had offered him any difficulty whatever. It was all so effortless that he was not even aware of his body, apart from its easy flow of responses.

In an incredibly short time he was grasping the first of the rocks, but he found it too smooth to hold and had to let it ride past. One after the other he had to relinquish the next three. It was only the last and smallest that offered him first a fingerhold and then a foothold. He clambered up until he reached the pinnacle and there he perched, with the rock between his legs.

He looked about him with the delighted smile of a conqueror. In the last of the light Vachau rose like a gaunt Saxon barrow, a timeless coffin of some super-being. On that funeral mound people were still going through the banal routine of life

without a scrap of ecstasy. His head erect, Plowart was aware of a spiritual supremacy, eddying an insight of all the world along his veins. Somewhere on Vachau, Lumas was weeping and snivelling about a man he had killed. Or perhaps he had stopped, now that the woman had gone back to him.

Over to the right, in the darkness and distance, was Guernsey, where the unpromoted Purchamp was weighing the possibilities of a new dossier. A case that might not be so luckless as Plowart's, and in which he need only pit his wits against the human and measurable.

Somewhere beneath his feet Lachanell turned and twisted with outflung limbs like a bloated starfish. Did he already know that the love that had sent him down there was changing course so soon?

And Claremont? She would still be swimming with the liteness of a fish, as impervious to the currents as he himself. Pain struck for the first time as he sat on his stone chariot, feeling the distance increase between them. It was true that she had tried to trap him, but that was forgivable, for he had abused all her humanistic ideals. It was only natural she should try to kill him in return, trivial as her grievance was. Well, when they met again he would forgive her magnanimously, wave aside all her apologies and give her responsibilities that would allow her endless opportunities to betray him if she wanted. Now he was above treachery and disloyalty. She must realise sooner or later that mortality and disaster were events reserved for lesser men. Her spiritual purity and health communicated a sense of peace and trust that he had not known at any time through his life: what did it matter that she had tried to kill him? She had been duped by the world's filthy morality, but her essence remained untouched.

But why had she said that she lied? The rocks had moved, despite the doubt she had sowed in his mind. She had shouted in the grip of the current: 'The rocks don't move, nor ever will!' But they had! Claremont had lied because she knew that the only thing that sank a man was doubt. But she had

laughably underestimated him, otherwise he would be down in the Channel somewhere. To doubt is to die, and so long as he purged it from every action he would live perpetually; that was the splendid conclusion to the swimming marathon that had brought him riding a rock tonight.

Despite his exhilaration, he began to shiver as his legs were immersed with each successive wave. Plowart tried to pull them up to his chin but after nearly overbalancing in the attempt, he gave up all ideas of comfort and let the legs dangle, flinching from each new drenching as if it were a blow.

After an hour or so a paralysis began to spread slowly up his legs and thighs to his belly, continuing up until his whole body felt cased in ice. But his mind remained clear and determined as he waited for the rescue he was sure would come. Although the dusk turned to total darkness, his certainty never wavered that the men who had shouted down from the promontory would not be long in finding volunteers to make the dangerous crossing.

When he was almost asleep, the scrape of oars against rowlocks came to him faintly above the sound of the sea. He was fully awake immediately and cupping his hands to his mouth, shouted: 'Ahoy! Over here on the rocks! Careful as you come, now.'

At the sound of his voice, a beam of light flickered on and travelled slowly down the line of rocks until it lit him, white and naked; in its glare. It rested on him just long enough to establish that he was alone, then flickered back along the rocks, sweeping each thoroughly from the sealine to its cap before passing to the next. Only after all the rocks had been slowly scrutinised did the light return to Plowart. When it rested on him a second time, a voice called roughly: 'Where is she? Where's the young Dame?'

'I don't know!' he shouted back impatiently. 'Still swimming, if I know her! Come in closer and I'll jump aboard.'

'D'you mean yur left her to drown?' The coldness of the question could not fail to strike him even in his exalted mood,

and he automatically clenched his fists. Was this the way these primitive brutes conducted a rescue? Straining his eyes to make out the boat, he yelled: 'Don't you see I'm perishing from exposure? Ask your imbecilic questions when I'm off here!'

'That's a chance you'll not get!' The voice returned, implacable in its malevolence. 'Yur speaking to Ben Quiller now! I marked yur back there on Guernsey, but I bided my time. If I'd known it was to be the young Dame who would die through yur, I'd have finished yur before. But she's one you'll pay the price for, by God! Say yur prayers, if you have any—we're leaving yur to the sea!' As he announced this, Quiller switched off his torch and said brusquely to his crew: 'Pull away, lads. There's nothing to be done here!'

As the oars scraped and Plowart stared incredulously into the darkness, scarcely believing what he had heard, a towering wave lifted the boat on its crest and bore it hard against the rocks. He just had time to see the long shape of the boat and eight or nine apprehensive faces bearing down on him before the planks shuddered against the rocks. In the brief moment before impact, two of the rowers had the presence of mind to use their oars as buffers, and their promptness saved the boat from being smashed to smithereens. The blades shattered under the strain, flinging the men who held them into the sea.

Seizing this chance of a reprieve, Plowart leapt the widening gap as the boat swung off again. His sudden weight almost capsized the craft, and the crew made frenzied efforts to steady it, while Plowart sprawled helplessly on the bottom boards. As the boat came back under control a dull knocking started at one end of the boat and continued regularly down the length of the planks. It was the head of one of the unfortunates thrown overboard. At the last knock, he emerged insensible at the other end of the boat and disappeared with a flurry of limbs into the darkness. As the body passed out of sight, the remaining members of the crew directed a storm of

oaths at Plowart, but he shrugged indifferently. Let them say what they liked, he was aboard!

As his eyes wandered from one hostile figure to the next, recognising each as men he had seen on one occasion or another at the Siren, he was surprised to see Buffonet, still carrying the marks of Quiller's beating. Plowart nodded to him and got an almost imperceptible nod in return. He had not forgotten his generosity, at any rate!

Quiller, covered from head to foot in black oilskins, said: 'Well, that's another two deaths to yur credit! But they'll be the last! Throw him overboard, lads!'

'Wait a bit!' Plowart said desperately. 'You don't understand! I've found the power I've sought for years! My mind's ablaze with a power most men only dream about. Take me back to Vachau and history will remember all of you!'

Quiller listened, a slight smile on his lips, then nodded to the two men nearest to him and they reached down and grasped Plowart while the rest of the men steadied the boat to counteract his struggles. As he was going over the side, he tried to make one last despairing grab at one of the oars, but his hands were smartly banged with a piece of wood and he went over into the sea backward. When he came to the surface the boat was already out of reach.

Resting on their oars they watched him battling up and down on the waves until Quiller shouted: 'Change positions, now. We'll have to make up for two short on the port side.'

'I've worn myself out, Ben,' Buffonet complained petulantly. 'I can't take another stroke, and that's the truth.'

'Yur lazy bastard, Buffonet! Always swinging the lead,' Quiller exclaimed irately. 'All right, get hold of the tiller then!'

The oarsmen quickly distributed themselves evenly along the boat, while Buffonet clambered aft to take over the steering.

Plowart started to shout and harangue between his struggles with the sea. 'Leave me, will you?' he called. 'Don't you know it's futile? The grave you're digging is yours, not

mine! The sea's no match for me . . . it'll soon quieten down, you'll see! And when it does, I'll be coming for all of you!

Ignoring his threats, Quiller bellowed: 'All right, put yur backs into it! Hard and strong, lads!'

Plowart started to shout louder as the distance became greater, raising himself out of the water with his hair hanging over his face like a mask. 'You can't kill me, you fools! I'm indestructible, I tell you . . . '

Buffonet looked away from the straining faces of the men rowing and glanced over his shoulder furtively. With one hand bent on the tiller and the other trailing over the stern of the boat and out of sight, he prepared to release the lifebelt, which he had removed while everyone's attention had been concentrated on Plowart's struggling. The lifebelt touched the water silently and floated gently backward into the darkness, from where Plowart's voice could still be heard shouting defiance as he fought the waves. Buffonet dared one last glance over his shoulder to see if it was floating roughly in the right direction, then settled himself more comfortably on the hard wooden seat. His lips moved inaudibly: 'It's just a chance. Who's to help a scoundrel if it's not another?'

And in the darkness, above the slapping of water, the men at their oars heard a last bellow before passing out of earshot:

'Indestructible, you fools!'

[illegible]

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